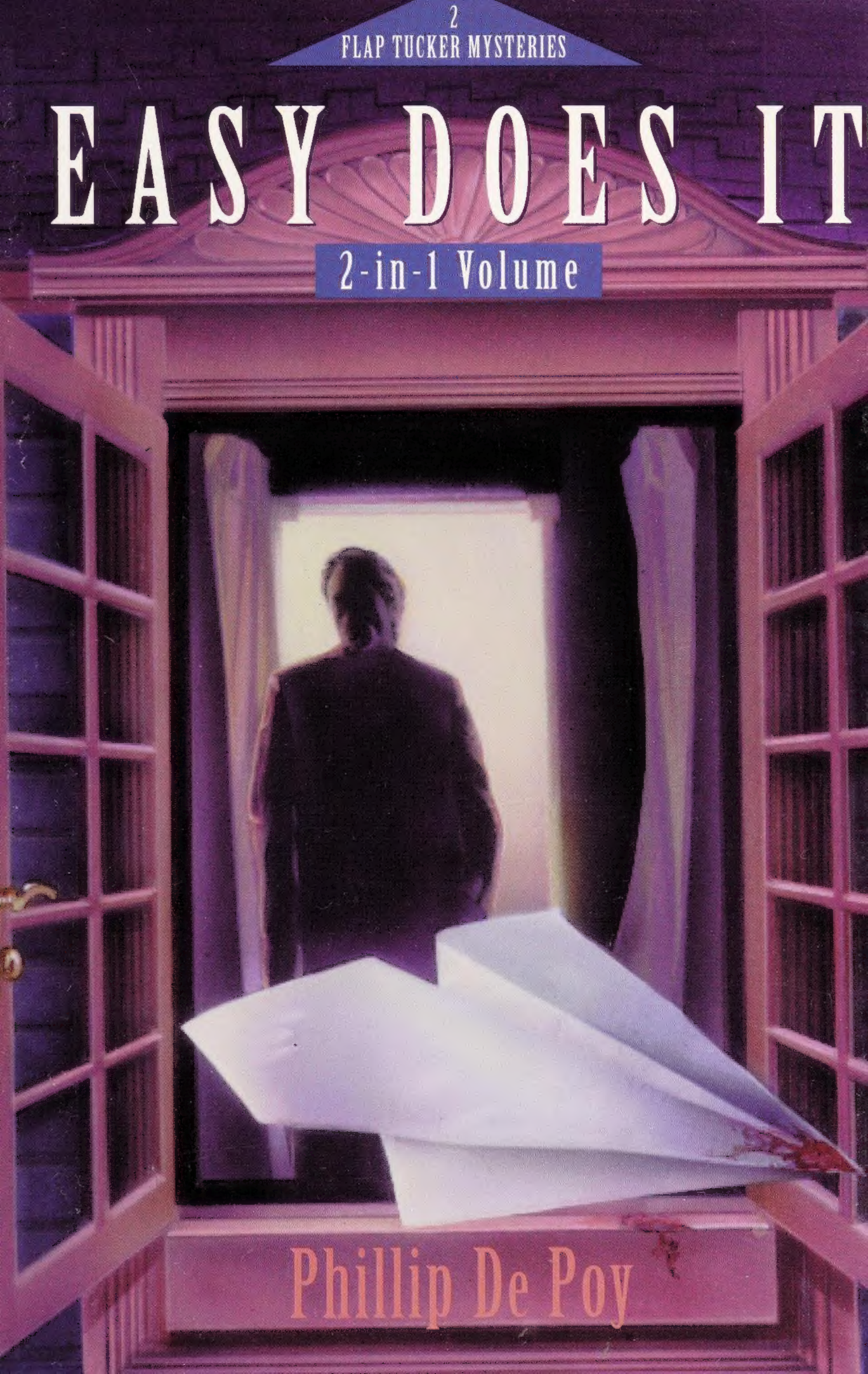
2
FLAP TUCKER MYSTERIES

# EASY DOES IT

2-in-1 Volume



Phillip De Poy

# EASY DOES IT

## 2-in-1 Volume

## Phillip De Poy

Flap Tucker isn't like other private eyes. He's a mystic, a finder of lost things, a veteran of a foreign war who lives on the wrong side of town and lets his mind go freely to nirvana. As good ol' boys and transvestite hookers pass in the downtown Atlanta night, Flap Tucker goes to work.

In ***Easy***, Flap's best friend, the beautiful nightclub owner Dalliance Oglethorpe, wants him to find the vanished wife of a millionaire scion—a half-wit who may have made the woman up in the first place. Flap searches for Augusta Donne and finds, instead, the brutal murders of two topless dancers and a ritually slain transvestite. Each step of the way, the case grows more sinister until Flap suddenly reaches that place only he can go: where a Zen-like truth illuminates the path and where Flap Tucker, the man with all the answers, stands in the way of a killer.

***Too Easy*** takes Flap and Dalliance into the deep South of rural Georgia and a quagmire of tangled family connections and long-held grudges. The Turner

*(Continued on back flap)*

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# EASY DOES IT!

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## EASY

## &

## TOO EASY

PHILLIP DEPOY

MYSTERY® GUILD

Garden City, New York

Published by arrangement with
Dell Publishing
a division of
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
1540 Broadway
New York, New York 10036

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ISBN: 1-56865-826-5

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# EASY

*Easy* is for
Heather Heath, a real Dalliance Oglethorpe,
Frances Kuffel, a real Catholic Girl,
and Tracy Devine, a real editor.
Any one of them calls at three in the morning,
I answer.

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# 1

## *Three* A.M.

Imagine the phone rings in the middle of the night; it's your best friend.

"You asleep?"

Check the watch. "It's two in the morning."

"I got a job for you."

"I don't want it."

"Yes, you do, you big layabout."

"What is it?"

"Dead drag queen in a pentagram; topless dancers stuffed in a trunk—a pretty blue Buick; somebody's wife is missing—maybe . . ."

"Fine, don't tell me, then."

"I'm telling you. Am I gonna see you at the Majestic in an hour?"

You don't want to, but curiosity gets to you. "Okay." It's a promise.

Mythology is what other people believe; religion is what *you* believe. And reason doesn't enter into it: Faith is the answer to everything. Pure reason is nothing but a phantom. Experience is the only truth. So here's what I believe; this has been my experience: I can find anything you can lose. That's my religion.

I was born Flap Tucker in a little town in Georgia; moved to Atlanta when I was eight. The best friend is Dalliance Oglethorpe—

curly dark hair never looks combed, still looks like a million bucks; green eyes always a little amused; tall enough to know better. Believes neither one of us had a chance at normalcy, growing up with our names. We never argue, it's why we're best pals.

The Atlanta we grew up in doesn't exist anymore—and in most ways thank God. We were just little kids in the early sixties, but there were still colored and white drinking fountains in the downtown department stores, clearly marked. We had no idea what they were. Dally thought they meant the water in one was regular clear water and the water in the other one was root beer flavored, for some reason. Colored water. I'll never forget the way she cried when she found out what it really meant.

I just wanted her to stop crying, so we went to the store and put cherry bombs under both fountains—blew them up real good. By the time they got around to replacing the things, the replacements had no signs. They were just two drinking fountains. We thought we'd really accomplished something—but maybe it all had something to do with Dr. King. He was in Atlanta too.

Neither one of us had any money. She was an only child; her parents were divorced—something of a scandal in those days, believe it or not. Both my folks worked, still had no dough. I was the oldest of three. The brother's an actor, the sister's a dancer—I turned out to be a layabout. The folks are just sick about it.

When you grow up without money one of two things can happen to you, as I see it. You get like Dally, where you're real good about finding money and keeping it, or you get like me, where you don't think about it at all. I just plain don't care. I always have enough for what's important to me.

As the responsible half of our duo, Dalliance came to own a club on Ponce de Leon called Easy. Once it had been a quick auto-maintenance place called EASY LUBE. I got up on a ladder one Sunday afternoon after I got out of the service—drafted on account of being the aforementioned layabout—and knocked down the LUBE. Dally said she wasn't looking to own a place with *exclusively* gay clientele. I didn't laugh: The concept of easy stereotypes is one that's kept the South down, so I'd prefer just to avoid them.

My own slack desire for money got early reinforcement. When we were still in high school Dally gave me a book called *The World's Religions,* and I got the same problem as every first-year medical student: They think they've got every disease they read about. I was a Hindu

and a Buddhist and a Taoist and an Essene all before I turned twenty, a Gnostic and a Cabalist before I hit my first divorce.

I grew up in Atlanta and let life take me where it would—that's the Taoist in me. By the time *I* was tall enough to know better, my path took me to wife.

Dally had tried to talk me out of it. "Now, explain to me exactly why you think you gotta marry this one."

I'd considered my response. "Well, she strikes me as a bit off kilter, and I think you'd agree I'm a little left of center myself, so I'm guessing we could be what they call 'a good match,' if you see what I'm saying."

"I don't."

"Plus she *asked* me to marry her, and I think it's bad manners to say no to a person like that."

"There's *gotta* be more to it."

"Maybe not. It just seems to be where the path is takin' me, you know?"

"Flap . . . don't do it, okay?"

"Why not?"

Then—completely a mystery to me—she got mad. "You are absolutely as dumb as the law allows."

"They got a law about that now?"

But the rest of what Dally'd had to say about my marriage plans had gone pretty much unspoken. I'd been stupid enough to believe at the time that it was because she'd run out of arguments about the proposed wife.

Her name was Dannen Hilliard—Neena, a big tall drink of water, long hair, a crooked grin. Had a boyfriend, a real-life terror with an eye patch and everything, something about a bar fight.

I guess it started when I had a sort of fling with her in the college days. She was smart and intense and so obviously out of her mind that I was impelled toward her and flung away from her with equal force—the way any meteor is around, say, Jupiter: You orbit for a while, then you're shot back out into the recesses of space.

The fling was brief—something of a secret from our pal Dalliance, I'm a little ashamed to admit—and then we went our separate ways. Little did I know what fiery juggernaut was headed back my way. Was there ever a Hurricane Dannen? There should have been.

On an April day, a lovely spring day, I got the fateful phone call.

"Hello?"

"Uh . . . hi . . . um . . . it's Neena."

"Neena? My God, where are you?"

"Um . . . the Shell station?"

"What?"

"The Shell station. Down the street. Can I come over?"

"God. Yes. Of course."

And there it was: the invitation. I knew better. You're not supposed to invite a creature of the night past your threshold, into your home. They can't come in unless you invite them. But that was my doom: I invited.

She came over, came in, and started to cry—actually, threw her arms around my neck and started to cry.

"I've missed you so much, you just don't know."

"Okay . . . I missed you too." Why not?

". . . I was so lonely . . ."

". . . I thought you had that guy . . . Nathan . . ."

"That bastard. He beat me, you know."

"What?"

"Yes. He put me in the hospital. His mother disowned him. And now no one knows where he is." She lowered her voice. "I think he killed some guys."

"I don't know what to say, Neena. Man. I'm . . . glad you're back . . ."

She nuzzled my shoulder like a child. "I've really been thinking about you." She looked up at me with a sincerity that would have persuaded the pants off a lesser man. "You."

"What?"

"I found that my life was empty without you in it, so I came back to ask you to marry me." And she looked back down.

"You . . . what?"

"Oh . . . marry me. We have to be together. It's all I could think of the whole time I was gone."

"The whole time?"

"And when you'd answer my letters with all that poetry—I knew you must have felt the same as I did."

I didn't have the heart to tell her the poetry wasn't even in the least bit directed at her. "Uh . . . I guess I must have."

"Well, then . . ." and she slung her elbow up behind my neck and pulled me into a kiss that seemed to last half an hour. When it was finished, so was I.

"So. Married, huh?"

"Will you? Say you will. I think I might kill myself . . ."

I mean, a woman comes all the way from the Shell station to say "Marry me," it's hardly polite to say no; it did seem like such bad manners.

So what could I say? "Well, you know—we gotta get a license." Beat. "Blood test." Pause. "Two weeks soon enough?"

And she began to cry, burying her face in my chest. Between her sobs I heard her whisper, "I knew you would."

We were married on a Saturday, two weeks to the day from our "proposal." We picked the name of a justice of the peace out of the phone book and called him at eight-thirty in the morning.

Within a half hour we were standing on the front porch of the very honorable Justice of the Peace Mr. Davis. He was irritated with us because he wanted to be on the lake, so he refused to let us in the house or even let go of his fishing poles. He held them in his left hand, his ceremony book in his right, and made his wife poke her head out the screen door to witness the time-honored rites. He wouldn't even take off his fishing cap with the hooks and lures stuck in it. We were married by a man who had artificial sardines on his head.

Rumors flew fast and wild about our nuptials. Dalliance continued to be angry for some unexplained reason and took to telling everyone Neena must be pregnant. So Neena did what she did best: She invented. Without telling me she made up an elaborate doctor's report with X rays and everything—and I don't even want to think about how she got X rays—to prove that she had a horrible tumor in her that prevented her from having children and was liable to kill her any minute. It made our Dalliance quite shamefaced.

"Hi." Her voice on the phone was very subdued.

"Oh . . . hi." I was zooming. "Listen, I've been *really* meaning to call you about the wedding and the deal with Dannen and all, you know—it just happened so fast."

"It's okay. I understand now. I heard about the doctor's report. You really are somethin', pal. Just when I think I can't like you any better, you go and do something this stupid and good."

So I said the only thing you could say at a time like that. "Doctor's report?"

"You know. About her tumor and everything."

"Ah. Right. Listen—do you mind, I think I need to take care of something here. Could I call you back?"

"Of course."

We hung up. I called for Neena. She came into the room. I asked her about her tumor.

She laughed. "It's great. It not only quells the rumors about my being pregnant, but people think you're a saint."

And that was that. That was her style. Why tell anything remotely resembling the truth when a really great whopping lie can get you so much more out of life? At the time I thought it was kind of charming in a wacky sort of way.

The real evil started the very next day. In the crashing thunder and pouring rain, there came a knock on the door of our little blue heaven. Neena was gone—job hunting, she said—so it fell on me to answer.

Two men stood at the door. One flashed a badge. "Flap Tucker?"

The other held up some papers and asked to come in. "Are you acquainted with one Dannen Hilliard?"

"She's my wife."

The two men looked at each other in unmistakable shock. The guy with the badge closed his eyes. "Wife?"

"Uh-huh. What's wrong?"

The one with the papers shook his head. "You're *married* to Dannen Hilliard?"

"Yes. Is she all right? What's going on?"

The one with the papers stood his ground. "I'll tell you what's going on. She's wanted for questioning in a murder case in Alabama. We're here to take her back to Birmingham."

The badge guy shook his head. "Yeah . . . questioning in a *murder* case . . ."

The other one, right at me, "We think she did it."

And I sat down without asking. "Murder?" Then I gathered my thoughts. "Does this have anything to do with someone named Nathan?"

The badge guy stood there. "How do you know about him?"

"My wife knew him before we were married."

They explained to me how old Nathan was wanted for the murder of three prominent "businessmen" in the Alabama nightclub scene, and eyewitnesses described his female accomplice, who had also fired shots, as being tall, redheaded, and fair skinned.

The badge guy lamented, maybe sympathized. "But now that she's married to you it . . . complicates things. See, her legal last name is *Tucker* now?"

I nodded.

He went on. "And, see, we got papers for Dannen *Hilliard.* We

have to get that little thing right. We have to go all the way back to the office and change the form."

Paper guy was calmer. "No big deal. We'll be back." He leaned in. "Maybe you could even be a part of this."

But I think they saw right away that I was just too stupid to be a part of a thing like that. They left; said they had a line on Nathan. They'd be back. I sat for the rest of the day in a darkened home, listening to the rain outside, waiting for my bride to return.

But fate is filled with little jokes. Before she came home the phone rang. And who was it? None other than Nathan himself.

"Hey, is Neena there? It's Nathan."

"Nathan?"

"Uh-huh. Is this that guy?" His voice kind of lightened and filled with jollity. "Neena told me about you, bud. How you took her in and hid her from the police, and how you're going to give her the money for us to hook up in Canada. You must be a great guy. I can't wait to meet you. Anyway, is she there?"

I couldn't speak for a second. Then, like I was talking in an office or something, "No, she's not in right now. Could I take a message?"

"Just tell her I'm back at the hotel now."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm back in my room, you know, that she got me at the hotel? She knows where it is."

"She does."

"Um-hmm. She just left. I forgot to ask her about the plane tickets."

"I see."

"So . . ."

"Yes. Absolutely. I'll tell her the minute she comes in."

"Thanks, man. Can't wait to meet you."

"Uh-huh, me too."

And we hung up. Neena came home less than five minutes later.

I greeted her. "So . . . find a job?"

"Huh? Oh . . . no. No. It's tough out there."

"It's fairly tough in here at the moment."

"Sorry?"

"Nathan called."

"Uh . . ."

"That's right. He's at the hotel room you got him. How long's he been in town?"

"In town?"

"Yeah, and while you're pondering let me just mention that the cops paid us a little visit, and they were very disappointed to find out you were married. They wanted to ship you back to Alabama. Something about a few dead businessmen. But I told them you were with *me,* so it was all right, for the moment."

"Um . . ."

"Then Nathan called . . . ."

"What'd he say?"

"Apparently he thinks you're with *him,* so once again: Imagine my surprise. Oh, and plus, he's very grateful to me for saving you from the police and—here's my favorite part—giving you money to finance your retirement to Canada."

"He got all that into one phone call?"

"He's very eloquent."

"I told him not to call here."

"I'd imagine."

"He's insane."

"Oh, and of course, *this* makes me very happy—to hear this makes me very, very happy indeed."

"No, I mean, he won't understand that it's over between us. He beat me, you know."

"So you said. How about telling him we're married? He might get the idea."

"Or he might kill you. He really might."

A sobering thought.

"How long has he been in town, Neena?"

She hesitated. I could actually see the faint whirl of gears in her head as she was trying to think up the next great lie, but in the end she just gave up, shrugged. "Two days. The cops probably followed him here. He's absolutely useless at anything covert." It was a very uncharacteristic moment of aplomb.

That night Neena checked herself into the Georgia Institute of Mental Health. She said she was having a breakdown. It was based on what she called double-bind ambivalence brought on by the cops, the boyfriend/husband confrontation, and some sort of regression or other. Did I happen to mention that her degree was in psychology? Plus I could only imagine what red tape was involved in some cops from Alabama trying to get somebody out of a mental hospital and back to Alabama.

She worked on her problems, underwent therapy at that clinic. I heard all about it from an orderly named Scooter. She actually said the

sentence, "I don't know what the big deal is, they were just hoods." These things take time. . . .

Further interaction with the staff included an affair with her therapist, a man named—honestly—Nete Schlag. Then, when she confessed the affair to some other staff at the clinic, Dr. Schlag was disbarred or dismembered or whatever it is they do to you when you have an affair with a patient, and they both went off to work as nurses in a hospital for drug-addicted teens. We divorced through the mail. I just got the final papers in October.

But, like so many things in life, the story goes on. Some storms never dissipate. In the six months since she'd left Georgia, I'd gotten weather reports. She and Nete moved to Boston so Neena could be closer to Jorge—one of our mutual acquaintances. Last I heard, she was a lesbian dental hygienist in New Mexico. Don't know what happened to Nete Schlag . . . or to Nathan. Don't care.

And through it all, Dalliance was there. She thought I was an idiot when I got married. She called me *honey* when I got divorced. She came over with food and wine and conversation as diverting as the autumn night is long. It might not have saved my life, having her for my best friend, but it went a long way toward preserving my frame of mind.

So when she called me for help I couldn't refuse. On a cold and lonely November night, about a month after the divorce was final, I met her at three in the morning, an hour past closing time for Easy. Ponce is a wonderland at that time of night. At three in the morning at the Majestic Diner (FOOD THAT PLEASES SINCE 1929), you just might see the guys in R.E.M. or Julia Roberts home visiting Mom or three Hell's Angels talking to Gene the Episcopal priest about the monastery in Conyers. You get a Coca-Cola and some chocolate pie. You listen for your best friend. The waitress calls you "Flap, hon," because she knows you from many a night like this. It's a certain kind of bliss: drizzling rain, neon buzzing, sizzle from the grill.

And then there it was: the sound of her voice as the door swung open.

"Marcia, sweetie—how's your knee?"

"Hey, Dally. Hardly know it's there . . . just like my husband." Big laugh—like a sound track, like a sitcom—or maybe the buzz from the pie was kicking in.

Dally turned my way. "There he is." And she slipped into the other side of the booth like she was falling into bed after a hard day at the office.

Marcia sweetie knew what to bring: decaf coffee and a chili dog. Dally took a bite before she said anything important.

"So, Flap . . . I'm asking: Are you through with the loss of your no-good wife or should I come back in the spring?"

"The only thing I lost is the cost of filin' the papers."

"You're not lonely?"

"I didn't say that. But I'm not lonely for marriage."

"So you ready to go to work?"

"I guess." I looked out the window at the rain. I knew what she wanted. She wanted to tap the Source. She wanted me to find something.

"Muster some enthusiasm, pal. It means a lotta money."

"I don't care about the money. And you don't understand what it takes out of me. It's not, like, detective work or some computer search network. My cosmology is the whole human spirit."

*"My cosmology is the human spirit.* Honest to God I'm gonna toss up my chili dog."

"Mock. I'm impervious."

"You're impossible."

"Alrighty then, call me a taxi."

"Okay . . . you're a *Yellow* Cab."

"Ah. Taunts. Like *that's* gonna make me take this job, whatever it is."

She slugged back the coffee. "Come on. Don't you even want to know what it's about at three in the morning?"

"All right, I admit I'm a little curious. I haven't worked in . . ."

"A year and a half, from the day you married Neena."

"Wow. That long?"

"Yeah. That was some wife you had."

"So what's the job?"

"Missing person."

I knew better. "That's it?"

She looked at her chili dog. "I think you gotta find the connection between the missing person and some other things."

"Why?"

"Great wealth, salvation of humankind, the end of evil as we know it—the usual thing."

"Okay, *don't* tell me."

"I'm telling you."

"Fine. Tell me."

"It pays fifty thousand dollars upon completion of the task, and three hundred a week to keep you going while you're working."

"Yeah, that oughta get me through the winter. *Tell* me about the events."

"Two nights ago a guy was found very dead behind his house in Decatur, inside a pentagram drawn in the dirt; last night two topless dancers from the other side of town turned up strangled in the trunk of a pretty blue Buick; and tonight just before I talked to you a friend of mine told me, for the third time, that he lost his wife—and he probably doesn't even have one, far as I know. Pretty interesting?"

"A little."

"More interesting if it's somehow connected to your divorce?"

"How could it be connected to my divorce?"

"So you *are* interested."

"A *little.*"

"Just say you'll take the gig, and I'll tell you a story."

I looked outside again. The rain was coming down a little harder now, and the neon flickered like red lightning. Three A.M. and there were *still* guys hanging on the corner, in the pouring rain, looking for a handout. In the spirit of that great notion "there but for fortune go I," someone in my head said, "Yes, I'll take the job." And before I could stop them the words were flying out of my mouth like blackbirds migrating south.

Dally said, "All right then." And that was that.

# 2

## *A Story*

So against my better judgment I said, "Okay, tell me a story."

She took another swig of the decaf and got me in her sights. "Let's start with a guy named Ruby—the drag queen—and his boyfriend-slash-roommate, Teeth."

"Guy's got a roommate named Teeth?"

"That's what they call him. I'll tell you about that in a second. Anyway, Teeth is sound asleep. He knows nothing until about six-thirty when he gets up to grab a smoke. And when he looks around there's, like, no Ruby. So he calls out. No answer."

"Where's this house?"

"Decatur, outside the city limits. One of those postwar, fifties, square houses: no personality, but pretty solid. You know, like everything out of the Eisenhower era. It's a nice quiet little neighborhood. Most of the owners have lived there since the houses were new."

"So Ruby and Teeth were a breed apart. The next generation."

She shrugged. "It's a new day, what are you gonna do? So Teeth gets up, out to the kitchen. Where's Ruby?"

"I give. Where *is* Ruby?"

She took a bite of the chili dog. I don't think she was hungry; she just did it for effect. "We cast our eye out the back door in the dawn's early light, and what do we see?"

"Ruby in a pool of blood."

"Nope. Smoke."

"Smoke?"

"So Teeth trundles out in his boxer shorts and stocking feet, shivering to beat the band, and a little past these hedges that separate their backyard from a small wooded area, there lies Ruby, white as snow, dead as a doornail, naked as a jaybird."

"Cold as a cliché."

"Precisely."

I had to repeat, "Smoke?"

"Yeah. Beside the cold, dead body of Ruby the drag queen was a little campfire, out but still smoldering. And smudged into the clay—drawn there by Ruby's hand, we presume—was a pentagram as large as a kiddie pool."

"A what?"

"A little kid's wading pool. That's how big it was, the pentagram inside a circle."

"Nifty. Where did you read this?"

"In the paper! Just another news story in between the trouble-in-Washington story and the heartwarming boy-choir-goes-to-Europe story. Told without a hint of sensationalism. I mean, the police guy was calm as the grave: 'The victim seems to have been trying to crawl inside the pentagram.' No big deal. See it every day."

"That was it?"

"They interviewed some of the neighbors."

"And . . ."

"They said they thought the couple were into Satanism. And the cops said they found black candles and 'books consistent with the satanic life-style.' Which I guess could be anything from Alistair Crowley to Joseph Campbell."

"So, with the goofy black-mass stuff the cops thought that some odd cult ceremony explained everything."

"Which it probably does."

"Except you think it's connected to some other events."

She nodded. I could tell she was into the story now: The chili dog was cast aside and the coffee was cooling off, but her eyes were heating up. "Last night on the TV news there's another story—not even the lead story, which means there was something even *more* hideous before I turned on the set—about these two topless dancers found strangled and stuffed into the trunk of a car parked in Buckhead."

"That pretty blue Buick."

"Right. The girls had been missing from work for well over a week, but the owner thought they had just taken off for Florida or something for the holidays."

"What club?"

"They danced at the Tip Top, they lived nearby, and they were both in real estate school."

"Tip Top's on the southwest side. How'd they end up in Buckhead?"

"That's one of the things the cops want to know. Plus, who owns the car?"

"Doesn't belong to one of the girls?"

"Nope."

"How were they strangled?"

She shrugged. "Didn't say. Said they were young—I think nineteen and twenty."

"What were their names?"

"I got 'em written down over at the office."

"So you heard these two stories and somehow got the idea they were connected."

She caught Marcia's eye. "My decaf's cold."

Without even looking up from her paper Marcia called out, "It's because you're talking too much. Just drink the damn coffee." But she moved to the pot and headed our way.

"I got the idea they were related," she said before Marcia got to us, "earlier tonight when Lenny came in the club."

Marcia heard. "Looney Lenny?" She made the *L*'s sing. "He comes in your club? He's in here about half the day. And then I see his skinny little butt head up Briarcliff. I always thought he was going to GIMH for medication."

Dally nodded. "He is. But after a nice session with everybody there he comes in Easy—about ten or eleven at night—and chases his medication with a dark beer."

I knew Lenny too. Everybody on Ponce knew Lenny. He was sunny and warm and clean and calm. The only real indication that there was anything wrong with the guy at all didn't even dawn on you until after you'd been around him for a while. Then you realized he was genuinely happy and really nice *all the time.* He really, really liked everybody. There wasn't a mean thought in his head. You tell me that doesn't spell trouble for a street guy in this part of the twentieth century. So he went to the Georgia Institute of Mental Health on Briarcliff

nearly every day as an outpatient. And he came to Easy nearly every night—as a friend.

Dally went on. "So he comes in to tell me—like, for the third time—that his wife is missing."

Marcia said, "I didn't know he was married."

Dally said, "He's not, I don't think. One time he told me his wife was Uma Thurman and once it was Angela Bassett. I guess it depends on what's playing at the dollar movie."

Marcia kind of smiled and poured the coffee and said, "That's Lenny." And she was gone.

I nodded. "So Lenny said . . ."

". . . his wife was missing. And I said that was too bad, and he said he thought it was Dr. Schlag's fault, and I said Dr. Schlag doesn't work there anymore."

"This is where I come in?"

She nodded. "I said, 'Remember, Lenny, Dr. Schlag ran off with *Flap's* wife, right? Not yours.' And he said it didn't matter, that it all started about six months ago when some guy called Teeth used to work there . . . and while your bride was still in custody. Teeth got fired sometime before Dr. Schlag left the institution in shame. So with a couple of well-placed phone calls"—she was really excited now; she was almost giggling—"I come to find out that when Teeth the orderly got fired from GIMH, he found him some more respectable work: at a topless bar." She was so proud of herself, I thought she was going to pop open like a piñata.

"Teeth worked at Tip Top?"

"Still does."

I felt a certain kind of . . . jolt, I guess. It's a sort of preperformance nerve thing I get just before I start a gig. A kind of pleasantly invigorating anxiety: like a double espresso and a mild electric shock. I was about to go to work. I nodded.

Dally went on. "So the short of it is, I told Lenny that you'd find his wife. That's the case."

"But there's more to it."

"I've never been more positive of anything in my life."

"How come?"

"Intuition."

"You gotta tell me everything, or I can't do the work. For example, who's paying this huge sum of loot?"

"Lenny."

"Lenny? What, in scrap cans?"

"Lenny's loaded."

"What?"

"Lenny," she leaned over to me, looking around the diner for a second, "is none other than Lenny Cascade."

"Cascade?"

She nodded. "Like in Cascade Art Imports."

Cascade Art Imports was the largest importer of ancient artifacts in the continental United States. Everybody knew that.

"Man." I guess you never know about some people.

She winked. "There's a million stories in the necked city, kiddo. They've got offices, or at least corporate law offices, right here in Atlanta—but they don't want you to know that."

"How come?"

She shrugged. "Who can fathom the ways of the corporate lawyer?"

I agreed. "Don't want to."

"Suffice it to say I talked to some guy name of Davidson, represents 'em—seems nice enough, maybe somebody to check out."

"I guess. By the way, Miss Information, you intimated you knew how Teeth got his name."

She smiled. "At GIMH? He bit an unruly patient on the arm. It's his way."

"Really." I was getting my wallet out to pay for the stuff on the table. "I wonder if he ever bit Neena?"

She yawned, patted my hand after I dropped a ten by the plates. "Everybody else did, baby. Why should he be any different?"

We were out the door before Marcia even noticed we were gone.

# *Solomon's Seal*

I got up early the next morning. Early for me: about eleven. I wanted to have a little daylight to poke around at Ruby and Teeth's place in Decatur. When you live in Midtown like I do, the drive down Ponce into Decatur is very pleasant. It was one of those late-autumn days when the air is impossibly clear and the last of the leaves are raging against the dying of the light with a kind of golden fury.

Teeth lived in a shabbier part of Decatur, and his house was a ways off from the rest in the neighborhood. It was a neat little square brick job, like Dally said: solid, no character, just like a thousand others in the area. Outside, it looked like a big mess. No yard work had been done since—I was guessing—the turn of the century. And there was a torn or missing screen in every window I could see. I popped a knock on the door, and I heard a rustling sound inside, but it was quite a while before it opened.

I said, "You Teeth?"

He said, "Nuh-uh. Wrong house. Nobody home."

I said, "I just want to talk about some stuff—have a look around."

He said, "What for?"

I said, "For about twenty minutes."

He hesitated. "You're not a cop."

"Nope."

"Insurance?"

"Nope."

He nodded. "The family sent you. They never got used to Ruby's . . . life-style." He actually smiled. "They musta gone nuts when they read that 'satanic' crap in the papers."

"I'm not from the family. It's not about Ruby at all, really. I—actually I'm looking for a guy's missing wife. Guy was a patient at GIMH while you were working there."

"It's not about Ruby?" He sounded a little sad.

"Lenny Cascade."

He shook his head, smiled again. It was a winning smile. He had a little gold star in the middle of his upper right incisor. All he said was, "Looney Lenny. He's married?"

"That's what he says."

"Well . . ." And after a second he swung the door open and stepped back.

I couldn't believe the difference inside the house. It was like a page out of *Better Homes & Gardens.* The walls were a rich gold, one of those layered paint treatments. The furniture was very expensive black and burgundy antique stuff, with an oriental rug that probably cost more than the house did. There was a cheery little fire beneath the ornate mantelpiece—and up over it there was a copy of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," only with a different face from the one in the original. Teeth was looking at it too.

"That's Ruby, Lucille Ball wig and all," he said, almost whispering. "Made a lot of money in the impersonation industry. That was painted by a famous Atlanta artist. RuPaul tried to buy it from us a couple of years ago, but we didn't sell it to him. I told Ruby that Ru just wanted to put his own face on it."

I looked at Teeth. "My sister used to be in a band with RuPaul, when he was a local phenom here. Remember RuPaul and the U-Hauls?"

He was impressed. "Your sister was a U-Haul?"

"She danced. It was a scene. A little past my time, but she's told me about it."

He sighed. "Those *were* the days. I met Ruby when he was a backup singer for . . . that guy, who was he . . . along with Kitty Litter, remember her?"

"Who could forget."

"What was that place on Peachtree?"

"Where they played? I don't remember."

"Sure you do. They had that choreography on the part, 'He's the nicest man in town.' "

And Teeth did the choreography, a combination of lewd June Taylor and wild Alvin Ailey. We both had a good laugh . . . for a second.

"Now," he said, sitting on the sofa, "Ruby's gone."

"Sorry."

He looked up at me. "Oh, I guess it's better this way than the plague or some god-awful street queer-bashing—there's a lot of that in town these days, you know." Then he looked at me for the first time, really. "We met—ever?"

"Don't think so. Could I just have a look around? There's probably no connection between what happened to Ruby and Lenny's missing wife . . ."

"I never knew Looney Lenny was married."

I shrugged. "And anyway, what makes you think what happened to Ruby wasn't some kind of antigay thing? It was pretty weird."

Teeth looked down. "Yeah," he said, quietly. "But I think that what happened to Ruby was antihuman, not antigay."

"Oh? You don't think it had anything to do with the Satanism . . . thing?"

"Look around. You don't have to be Freud to figure out the difference between satanic worship and tantric sex."

So I humored him and cast my eye about the place. Sure enough, the items here and there that the cops had interpreted as satanic were, in fact, largely Hindu, some Buddhist, tantric icons. Most were couples in odd or impossible sexual postures. Some were special candles, scented, I thought, like a kind of incense. Some of the things were objects completely unfamiliar to me. But I could tell they had significance because they were lit by special sconces.

I looked back at Teeth. "I especially like the one of Shiva embracing the planet."

He was surprised. "How did you know that?"

"My cosmology is the entire human spirit."

He rolled his eyes and said, "Oh, Jesus."

"Makes twice I've used that line . . . with the same effect."

"I guess you'd better get some new material."

"I'm a student of world religions. I've seen pictures of the end of the world from the Hindu pantheon, and you have a statue of it in your living room: Shiva the Destroyer in a love embrace with the world. Not the cheeriest of objets d'art, but one with which I'm passingly familiar. You guys believe the end of the world is at hand?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

"Uh-huh. So what happened to Ruby, then?"

"Well . . ." He indicated a chair by the fire and I took it. He settled back. "Ruby and I began the Kamasutra for, you know, mostly fun back in the middle eighties as a way of safe sex. You know the thing where you get up to the point of actually—how shall we say—consummating the passion du jour, and then you willingly renunciate your ching?"

"You don't completely follow through."

"Uh-huh, and eventually you get some pretty intense stored-up energy."

"I'll bet."

"And this stored-up energy can eventually be channeled into other things: working harder, curing illness, helping friends. Ruby and I were pretty far into it. I know it's hard to believe, but there was some heavy kind of action here every once in a while."

"Like?"

"Once we knocked out an opportunistic infection in a positive."

"You cured a guy of AIDS?"

He threw his hand at me. "No." He shook his head. "We stopped an infection that would have killed him because he'd got no more immune-system juice left. And he didn't die."

"What else?"

"Well . . . we never worried about money or food or clothing. We were like the lilies of the field."

"Uh-huh."

He lowered his voice. "Ruby dreamed about the other side."

"What?"

"Even described it. A giant hall with huge statues. Ruby was walking above the ground—inches—headed toward a beautiful light, and then a voice like growling said, 'Get away,' and he was back in the living room here, only it was three hours later." Teeth sat back as if his point had been proven.

I said, "This explains the pentagram?"

"The pentagram is the seal of King Solomon. It's a holy sign. It was never a satanic sign. It has nothing to do with Christian thinking at all, and Satan is the Christian devil, right? Solomon was a Hebrew king, a master builder. His seal represents the architecture of the metaphysical world."

"Never knew that."

"Whatever. I'm just saying the stupid queer-hating cops have thrown a real net of ignorance over our whole belief system."

"So what about the pentagram?"

"It's supposed to protect you from the difficult energy of other realities. I mean, all this tantra, it makes you more susceptible to influences—light and dark. Ruby was trying to get inside the Solomon's Seal to be safe from the growling voice that had followed him from the other side. I'm convinced of that."

"But it didn't work."

"In a way, maybe it did."

"What do you mean?"

"The demon didn't get Ruby's soul. I think the thing could only desecrate the body. The spirit was saved." He lowered his voice. "I never heard anything that night. I think Ruby heard the monster and went outside to confront it. I think Ruby brought the monster from the other side. I think Ruby was going to banish it back to the demon world. That's what the pentagram was for. I was in a deep sleep and Ruby was facing the monster from the id. Only the monster was too powerful for us . . . people like us." And Teeth seemed to be including the entire human race in his assessment.

"Okay. That explains it." I tried to sound like I was taking him seriously, but it probably didn't come out that way.

"I know you think I'm insane . . . but it's what I believe. Catholics think that the wafer and wine become flesh and blood and *then* they eat it. It's ritual cannibalism, I call it."

"Well, they would say, wouldn't they, that it's a symbolic act of taking Christ into your heart."

Teeth shrugged. "I don't care what they'd say." He looked into the fire. "It won't bring Ruby back."

No arguing with that. Once you're found naked and killed in your backyard and you're dead for a couple of days, there's very little chance you'll actually be coming back. I stood up.

"Mind if I have a look in the back, where the pentagram was?"

"Whatever." Teeth was still looking into the dying embers.

I pointed. "Out . . . this way?"

"I'm not gonna take you back there, if that's what you want."

"Okay. I'll just make myself at home. Through the kitchen?"

He nodded.

I started out, then I turned around. "Um, I'm wondering what I'd call you in, say, a more formal setting."

"It's Horatio, believe it or not. Horatio Thomaston. But I used to have an act in those wacky eighties we were just talking about? Horatio *Hornblower.* You can just imagine."

"I'd rather not." But he seemed to be a little cheered up, thinking about the good old days.

The kitchen was as neat as a pin. They had those copper pots and pans on a big rack above the gas range. In the window box there were spices growing: tarragon, basil, thyme, parsley, chives, and some kind of mint in a container all by itself. You have to do that. Mint spreads.

Out the back door, and there was the evidence of my hypothesis: mint everywhere. The backyard was shaded and the weather hadn't frosted yet, so the mint was still hanging on. Past the little boxwood hedge that separated the backyard from the more wooded portion of the land, the mint got even more unruly. About forty yards into the outback there was a circle of stones close to a stand of pines and a patch of red clay dirt.

Even after the rain, and the cops, there was still a trace of the design drawn in the clay. Georgia red clay is like concrete. You can play tennis on it. All by itself, nothing can grow in it.

In the stone circle there were wet black ashes. I poked around, but there was nothing. I wasn't even sure why I was there, except to get a feel of the place. You never know. Maybe something I was seeing but not understanding would come in handy later. It works that way a lot.

I walked around the trees for a while, and in the pine straw about ten or twelve feet from the scene I saw a glint of gold. I bent down. It was a little kid's necklace or something. Not big enough for an adult's neck, but I thought it was too big for a wrist. It was a thin little chain with hearts. I didn't really think it was anything, but I popped it in my pocket anyway. You never know.

What a beautiful day it was. The leaves were raining down in fifty different colors and the sky was even clearer than it had been. You had to wonder how naked corpses and strangled dancers fit into such a rapturous scene.

Then, just for laughs, I decided to stand in the middle of the pentagram, get a view from the victim's perspective. I closed my eyes, trying to get a sense of what Ruby might have seen or felt or known at the last.

For one second I thought I could hear a low, growling voice and see the rude beast slouching toward me dragging dead bodies and bent on murder. But it was a shadow monster and couldn't live long in the sunlight. I opened my eyes. It was gone—so fleeting I wondered where the image had come from in the first place. Probably from what Teeth had just told me about Ruby's odd nightmare. But I felt cold.

Mostly so I could avoid the issue altogether, I headed back to the house. There was Teeth in the kitchen, fixing another pot of coffee. I came in through the back door. He seemed better, ready to hear the questions I really wanted to ask. That's the trick of these kinds of interviews: get them talking about what they want to talk about first, and then ask them what you want to ask after.

I shoved a chair out of the way and sat down. He brought me a mug of coffee without asking. It was a very lovely mug: Persian motif. I drank it black, but I wished there was sugar. I didn't want to ask. I had more important questions.

"So you know Lenny?"

"Uh-huh." And then, almost to himself, he said again, "Looney Lenny," shaking his head.

"Never had to bite him?"

He raised his voice. "You bite a couple of guys on the arm." He sat across from me at the white-pine table. "You get a reputation and it stays and stays. . . ."

"So anyway, Lenny ever mention a wife?"

"Who paid attention? He talked about sex and aliens a lot. And he even said his father owned an island in the Pacific where he was going for vacation. I mean, he was cute and sweet and all, but I really didn't take anything he said seriously, you know?"

"You don't happen to remember a Dannen Hilliard?"

"Neena?" He smiled. "She was a pistol. I can't imagine anyone ever meeting her and not remembering." He lowered his voice. "She ran off with her doctor."

"I know."

"Why do you ask?"

"The doctor?"

"You're *never* going to believe this. His name was Nete Schlag."

"Yeah, that's the one—anyway, Lenny says Dr. Schlag stole his wife away."

"He thought Neena was his wife? She would have eaten him for breakfast."

"No, Lenny thought Dr. Schlag was stealing all the girls, I think."

"Maybe." Teeth raised his eyebrows.

I couldn't read him. "What?"

"Well, I always thought he was one of *our* tribe . . . until he ran off with Neena."

"Why did you think that?"

"Oh, he was sensitive and kind and warm and soft-spoken . . . you know, not like a *real* man."

"Uh-huh. Just like Lenny is nice and funny and smiling all the time, so there *must* be something wrong with him."

"Exactly."

I shook my head. "It's a mean old world."

"You're telling *me*?"

I took a sip of coffee. It was good. French roast. "So, you bit a guy on the arm, and they let you go—over at GIMH."

"*That* falls under the 'mean old world' category. The guy wouldn't calm down. He was screaming and waving those big arms around, whacking everybody in the face . . . including, I think, good old Lenny, now that you mention it . . . along with Dr. Schlag and a few other orderlies. But *I* was the one who subdued him, and that's the thanks I get."

"Biting him was the only way."

"That's what I thought."

"But he wasn't your first?"

He smiled. "All right, maybe he wasn't."

"So you went to work at the Tip Top."

"You *did* get some information."

"Most of it came from a friend of mine. Ever go to the Easy club on Ponce?"

"Easy Lube? Once or twice, when there was a good band."

"That's my pal: Dally. She owns it."

"I don't understand the connection."

"She's my, like, manager. I'm a kind of one-man lost-and-found, and she sets up the work for me. Only this one is a little stranger than most. . . ."

"On account of it's instigated by Lenny. Is this some kind of charity detective work, or is that an oxymoron?"

"Lenny's got money. His father owns an island in the Pacific."

"Okay, then *don't* tell me."

"I'm telling you."

"Whatever."

I shifted in my seat, leaned forward. "So you went to work at the Tip Top."

"They love me there. The girls are safe with me, as you might imagine, and I've got the reputation of biting people who don't behave . . ."

". . . and the name to back it up . . ."

"Exactly, and the money's good and the girls are really sweet, most of them, so . . ." He shrugged and took a sip of coffee.

"Did you know the girls who got killed?"

He set his mug down on that pretty white tabletop. "Wasn't that awful? I only knew them slightly. They were part-timers. I think they were in school together or something. They only danced when they had to." He leaned forward and whispered, "And they weren't very good."

"Loath, as we are, to speak ill of the dead."

"Right."

"So what do you think happened?"

"Some weird bar guy? Some of the men that come in that place are really awful. And believe it or not, coke is still a big habit with these girls, some of them. A guy comes in and gets them a bump or two, they'll follow him anywhere. I try to watch out for it, but . . ." And he shrugged again.

"You're not their mother."

"Alas, not."

"Nothing else?"

He peered into the corner of the room like he was watching some movie in his head, and then he blinked. "Nope. Nothing I can think of." Then he wised up. "Hey. Wait a minute. Why are you asking me about . . . you don't think there's some connection between Ruby and the . . . those girls . . ."

"I don't know. But there *you* are: the link between Lenny, Ruby, and two dead dancers."

Incredulous as he doubtless was, he managed a calm "Surely you can see it's a coincidence."

"The fact that you've been anything *but* cagey?" I nodded. "That would seem to indicate coincidence—to me. But I'm smarter than the cops. They may see a connection and be back to talk. Watch yourself. You got a coupla strikes already, you know."

"I'm a queer Satanist with a gangster nickname."

"For starters."

"It's my lot in life to be misunderstood."

"Horatio," I said, leaning back in my chair, "that's *everybody's* lot in life."

We spent another forty minutes or so chatting. He seemed like a good guy, really—the talk about tantric energy notwithstanding. I

guess everybody's got to believe something or other. A lot of indigenous Australians believe that dreams are the real stuff of life, and waking hours are just what you have to put up with to get back to reality. Take it from me—and, I guess, Kierkegaard—facts are mutable, faith is real.

# 4

## *Looney Lenny*

That evening I was in Easy at about my usual time. The band was starting a second set, it was after twelve, and the night had turned a little cold. The club was warm and the music wasn't too loud—to tell you the truth, it was the closest thing to *home* I had. I walked in and Hal the bartender pulled out the bottle of wine he kept just for me: 1986 Château Cantenac Brown. It's a third grand cru Margaux, and it's *not* an affectation. It tastes better than anything on earth. I found a bunch of it in an A&P superstore, and it was mispriced. It was supposed to be $91 a bottle, but the clerk thought it couldn't be that much so he made it $19 a bottle instead, and I bought all they had. I could take the rest of my days waxing poetic about its finish alone, but as I was about to warn Hal not to spill a drop, Looney Lenny walked in and my mind moved to other matters.

Easy is set up in a kind of outré way: The tables are all junk-metal sculpture-looking things, and the bandstand is set on top of one of the old automobile hydraulic lifts from when the place was a garage. So the band starts playing, the lights go funny, the band goes up. The first couple of times you see it it's pretty impressive. This was a little combo called Judy's Grace. The singer, Kelly, had just been called one of the hottest new voices in alternative music by none other than *Rolling Stone* magazine, so there was a pretty fair crowd for a Tuesday

night. They were pumping out a crunching vocal version of the Peter Gunn theme song. It seemed appropriate.

"Lenny!"

He saw me and smiled his sweet little smile. He shuffled over, took the stool next to mine. "Hey, Flap. You gonna find my wife for me?"

"Yes, I am." I took a little sip of my wine.

Hal brought Lenny a dark draft and Lenny nodded. "Hey, Hal. How's your momma?"

Hal leaned over the bar and rested his forearms in between his own big bulk and Lenny's tiny glowing face. "She's out of intensive care, and I think she'll be home by Christmas, Lenny. Thanks for asking."

I looked at Hal. "What's the matter with her?"

Lenny answered, very concerned. "It's her hip. She suffers with it so much."

Hal nodded. "Hip replacement. She's fine." And he hoisted himself up and went to make more drinks.

That was Lenny. He turned his countenance my way. "So, Flap . . . we both got a missing wife, huh?" And he patted my shoulder sympathetically.

"Yeah, but the difference is, I don't want mine back."

He laughed, as they say, in spite of himself. "That Neena." He shook his head. "She was a pistol."

"So it's been said. But tell me about *your* blushing bride."

"Augusta."

"Tell me about her."

"Flap, it's like I wrote out a list of my favorite things and gave it to Santa. She's everything perfect. She's the essence of the feminine. She's yin to my yang."

"How long she been missing?"

"About a month."

"Where'd you meet her?"

"At the hospital."

"Really."

"She just appeared there one day."

"What? Like a patient or a nurse or a visitor . . ."

He smiled and look down, like he was embarrassed for me. "Well, Flap . . . you know I'm not quite as stuck on labels as most people are. She was just there." He shrugged. That was enough for him.

"Last name?"

"Cascade."

"Before you married her, Lenny."

"Don't know."

"How could you marry her without finding out her last name?"

"How could you marry Neena without finding out she was wanted for murder? I mean, it seems to me that a thing like that is lots more important to know about a person than whatever their last name is, don't you think?"

I smiled and took another sip of wine. "You got me there, pal."

He took a big gulp of his beer, really happy. "Great band, huh?"

"Yeah. Look—you gotta give me a little something to go on with Augusta, Lenny. What did she look like, where did she live . . . you know, what was her phone number, things like that."

"She lived with me, so, you know, her number was the same as mine."

"Lenny . . ."

"Honest to God, Flap, I don't know much about her before we married."

"So where'd you get married?"

"On the front porch of the very honorable Justice of the Peace Mr. Davis. He was irritated with us because he wanted to be fishing instead of marrying somebody."

I took in a deep breath. "No, Lenny. That's how Neena and I got married, remember?"

"Really?" He seemed genuinely confused. "Then how did Augusta and I get married?"

And that, too, was Lenny—alas.

I had to laugh. "Can you at least describe her?"

"I did. She was the perfect woman. We talked about everything. It's like I invented my exact match and then there she was."

So the evidence was mounting: Augusta was a figment. I said, "I mean, what did she look like, Len? Like hair color, distinguishing marks, you know."

He thought really hard for a second, and then, like somebody flicked on a light bulb in the old attic, he said, "Would a photo help?"

"Uh, yeah, Lenny. A photo *would* help."

He went fishing in the back pocket. Out popped a picture of a living doll, and I use the term advisedly. I think they call that color of hair *auburn.* I don't know what word would describe that skin. She did look like something someone would make up.

"Jeez, Len, what'd you do, tell her you were rich?"

"I *am* rich."

"Yeah, that's what Dally told me—but nobody ever believes you when you tell 'em, do they?"

"No."

"So how'd you get such a lovely . . . person to be even a *little* interested in a mug like you?" I smiled up at him.

He grinned really big then. "Yeah . . . amazin' . . . ain't it?"

So I started thinking all sorts of things. Lenny could have gotten this photo anywhere and decided she was the object of his affection. I didn't believe for a minute she was his wife.

"So, Len . . . what about the time you told Dally you were married to Uma Thurman?"

He was baffled. "She *believed* that? Man, she's more gullible than I am—and I think we'd both agree that's goin' some. I mean, you know, Flap . . ." He leaned in confidentially, tapping my elbow. "How does a guy like me get Uma Thurman? Come on."

"Yeah, but . . . Len . . . how does a guy like you get anybody?"

He looked down. I could see right away I'd hurt his feelings, and I wished I hadn't. He spoke real low. "Hey. That's mean."

I nodded. "Sorry, Lenny. That *was* mean. I was just kiddin' around—like before with the crack about you bein' a mug an' all."

And there he was, instantly back, grinning ear to ear; all was forgiven. "Okay."

"So . . . if I go and ask around GIMH about Augusta, they're gonna remember her?"

"You saw the picture. Would you forget her?"

"Right. Could I take the photo with me, just in case?"

It took some doing, being the only photo of her he had, but in the end I prevailed upon his astute understanding of human nature.

"Lenny, how am I gonna describe a woman like this without a picture? Words'll fail me, nobody'll understand me, I won't find her for you."

He looked hard at the picture. "Oh."

"So . . ." I held out my hand like he was a kid with a stolen toy.

He handed it to me the same way. "Just, you know, be careful."

"I'll carry it right next to my heart." And I slipped it into the breast pocket of my tweed.

He examined me for a minute or two, like he was staring a hole in the pocket where I put Augusta, then he said, "You're a pretty swell dresser for a layabout."

"I'm no layabout. I got a college degree."

"You ain't worked in a year and a half . . . Dally said."

"Yeah, well . . . I was working on my *marriage* for a while there, right?"

He nodded and sipped his brew. "Takes work. And compromise."

Yeah. Compromise. It was still my contention that Lenny had compromised with *reality*—to the extent that it had eventually just given up and gone south for the winter.

I finished off my glass. "So . . . you got nothing else to say to me?"

"About . . ."

"About your missing wife, Lenny."

He looked at me like I was captain of the goon patrol. "Jeez, Flap. What more do you want?"

I could see it was no good. Details just didn't trouble Lenny. He was a big-picture man. And if I thought about *that* long enough, I'd probably come to envy the guy.

He skipped off the stool. "Welp, I gotta go. I just wanted to make sure you were on the job. Plus, I'm not supposed to have too much beer on this medication."

Hal overheard. He winked at Lenny. "You're really not supposed to have *any* beer with it, pal."

Lenny smiled back. "Like one beer's gonna kill a guy." Then he leaned in to me so nobody else could hear. "Find her, Flap. That's all I want you to do. I love her like fire. I already gave the first money part to Dally, so . . . okay?"

And then he looked into my eyes with such a sweetness and a . . . sadness. God. I thought I might cry. I patted his arm really hard. "I'll get her for you, bud—some way or other."

And there it was: the pact. There was no turning back for me now. I'd promised. If she was a real live girl and not some yin-Pinocchio from his fevered daydreams, I'd get her back. If she was all in his head I'd restore her there. I could do it too. I can talk most people into anything . . . especially if it's something they already want to hear.

Lenny Cascade accepted my promise. He nodded, and some of the sadness even left his eyes.

The band was ending another number, and the crowd was getting a little rowdy. Some drunk was screaming. Lenny waved a little-kid wave and he was off. He weaved through the dancers and the drinkers and the dunderheads. I watched him until he was almost out the door, and everybody he'd bumped into had smiled at him and said, "Hey, Lenny."

"Quite a guy."

I hadn't noticed Dally coming up behind me. She'd watched him exit too. I turned. "Yeah. He's something else."

"Did you get what you needed from him?"

"No, not really. I gotta go over to GIMH tomorrow and see if I can maybe separate his perception from the bulk of reality."

She sat on the barstool where Lenny had been. She was dressed in a man's pinstriped suit, three sizes too big for her, a dark shirt, and a pale pink tie. It was gangster gag drag from the forties.

I smiled at her. "Nice look."

"Yeah. I got a look, all right. So what *did* he tell you?"

"He thinks he's married. He showed me a photo."

She sat forward. "Really? That's new. He didn't have one the other day."

"Well, that's just more fuel for my fire."

"Fire?"

"I got a hunk of burnin' feeling that our boy Lenny has made the whole thing up. He fished out this photo from somebody's dream library, and he's passing it off as his other half."

She nodded. "That's Lenny."

"So anyway, he said he met her at the hospital, and I thought I'd go see if anybody there knew her."

"Good."

I moved my glass toward Hal as he passed me by. "Look, sugar . . . you said something last night about the connection between these . . . events, the thing about Ruby, the girls in the trunk, Lenny's wife . . . you said they were all connected in some important way, like I was supposed to figure it out, and then you *gave* me the connection: Teeth."

"Teeth is *not* the connection, he's just something they all have in common—like Lenny missing a wife and you missing a wife gives you something in common, but it doesn't necessarily make you connected, right?"

"Right, that's what I was gonna say: Teeth is just a coincidence. . . . I think he's not the connection."

"Right."

"So what is the connection?"

She slapped my knee. "That's for *you* to figure out, big boy."

"No, I mean, what makes you think there's a connection at all?"

"Woman's intuition."

"Say what?"

"We all got it. Especially Southern women. You know Loretta Lynn saw a vision of her daddy on the day he died in another state."

"I saw the movie."

"Southern women have a very high ESP quotient."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, Flap, and you know, I thought you'd be a little more . . . disposed to this kind of thinking, given your *penchant* toward the mystical."

"It's exactly my predisposition in favor of the Zen thing that makes me suspicious of every little bit of it."

"Really?"

"The Tao that can be said in words is not the Tao."

She slipped off the stool and rolled her eyes. "I should know better than to talk to you about this stuff."

I stood up too, just as Hal brought my new glass. "So there's really nothing more than a hunch that makes you think something's up with all this?"

She stepped in closer to me. "A hunch and a letter from Lenny's father."

And there it was. The real reason for our little adventure: Mr. Cascade. His import business, Cascade Art Imports, was the most successful enterprise of its type in the world. He specialized in cool archaeological artifacts from Asian countries. He usually bought them for a ton of money and then sold them to rich people for ten tons of money—which, as any dope can see, is a tidy profit of nine tons. No inconsequential sum in today's market.

I smiled. "And what did good old Mr. Cascade have to say?"

"Just that Lenny had called him, needed help; said I was his only real friend outside of the nuthouse. So Dad wrote and asked me to help *and* promised to pay whatever Len had offered."

"That's all?"

"Yup."

"Can I see the letter?"

"Sure. It's official. Company stationery and everything."

"A business letter."

"Right."

"Can I *see* it?"

"It's in the office."

So we moved through the fair-sized crowd to her office behind the bar area. The band was singing some song about being behind the eight ball. I was thinking how often live music seemed like a sound track to my life—and speculating as to how this particular song might fit in.

Her office was messy, as usual, and too dark, but it was actually very clean and well-organized, like Ms. Oglethorpe herself. She went right to the letter on her desk.

"Here."

I took it and got it in the light from the lamp on her filing cabinet.

> *Dear Ms. Oglethorpe:*
>
> *My son Leonard has mentioned you. I believe you are in a position to do me a great service, for which I would be very grateful. He needs help in locating a missing person. If you can secure such aid, please contact me at the above number. I herewith guarantee to pay whatever monies are promised by my son. He and I have spoken of this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.*
>
> *Sincerely,*

It was signed by Charles Cascade himself, and on the business stationery.

"You waited to tell me about all this?"

"I wanted to check it out."

"And in checking it out . . ."

She nodded, reading my mind, as she so often did. "That's when I found out more about Teeth."

"Like he was Lenny's keeper."

"He gave Lenny his medicine, yeah."

"And when you went looking for him you found out about how he was currently working at Tip Top . . ."

"Well . . . you know, then it was in the papers, all that about his boyfriend, and there's good old Teeth sniffling and talking about Ruby . . ."

"And then the next night you see the telecast about the girls at the Tip Top who got strangled . . ."

". . . which maybe has nothing to do with anything . . ."

". . . but the coincidence factor is just about off the charts by now . . ."

". . . and, plus, I got a hunch."

"A woman's intuition."

"Right."

I set the letter down on the desk. "Okay. So maybe there's no connection at all, or maybe, because of Mr. Cascade . . . something."

"Right . . . something."

I started to say how she was nuts, but then I remembered the day she had told me not to mess with Dannen because something bad was up with her. *Then* I thought about how Dalliance Oglethorpe had once told me that the President of the United States was going to die. She told me this in the early days of November 1963, when we were just little kids on our adventures in downtown Atlanta. I had told her then that I thought she was nuts.

I looked at her, then, in her office. "Dally . . ."

"I know you think I'm nuts."

"No, I was thinking just the opposite, actually." I held out my hand and she took it in both of hers. "I was just thinking how crummy my life would be if it wasn't for you."

She whispered herself over to my face, kissed me on the cheek, and turned away a little bit. "Yeah, well, it's not *all* that great as it is."

It made me smile. "Uh-huh, but at least I got work."

"There *is* that."

"You said last night you had the girls' names here, where the car was in Buckhead, stuff like that?"

"Oh." She seemed distracted for a minute. Then she found another piece of paper in the pile on her desk and handed it over. "Here."

Written in Dally's ornate hand were the words *Hanna Georgia and Patty Pumpkin found in Buckhead parking lot behind cinema.*

She smiled. "Stage names, wouldn't you say?"

I looked up. "I'd say a lot more than that."

"It's all I got."

She shrugged and headed back out into her crowded dominion. The band was playing "Mood Indigo," and I said, "Isn't it great these kids today got a respect for Ellington?"

She winked. "Think again, pal. Take a look at who's sitting in with the band, singing with Kelly."

I peered through the smoke and the fuzzy lights, and sure enough, there were the Indigo Girls, cheek to cheek with Kelly and in harmony heaven.

I listened for a minute as we were walking back to the bar. "Still—it's nice that they're singing a song by the Duke."

The song ended. The audience went wild. I looked over at Hal, who had been protecting my glass of wine like it was the Holy Grail—which, in some small way, it was. I took it from him. "Great song, huh?"

He was whistling between his two index fingers, and he stopped long enough to say, "Yeah, man, those Indigo Girls sure can write 'em."

Dally giggled. It was very charming and sort of uncharacteristically girlish. "You know what's wrong with the world today, Flap?"

"Everybody's ignorant?"

She was still laughing. "Nah. What's wrong with the world today is that now there's more knowledge available out there than anybody could ever get ahold of, so everybody ends up *looking* a little stupid. Information overload. I mean . . . you can't know everything."

Before I responded I looked her in the eye, and I could tell she was trying to say something big, something about how the information explosion was making idiots of us all. All these facts are available, but they're just so overwhelming that we shut down. We don't even *want* to avail ourselves of them. It's like how I get when I go shopping in a mall. There's so much to take in that I can't focus on any one thing, and I usually end up after a couple of hours just giving up, dazed and humiliated, with nothing in hand. But I could tell she was also trying to say something about this particular thing with Lenny.

So I told her, "That's the problem with living in a post-relativistic world: You can't really know *anything*—no real cause and effect anymore, so that any one phenomenon can be tied, eventually, to every other event that ever has or ever will exist."

"What?"

"Everything is everything."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the girls in the trunk and the death of Ruby and the missing, fictitious wife of Leonard Cascade—they *are* all connected to each other, but they're also connected to everything else in the universe, so the connection may not be all that significant. *That's* the information explosion for you: In infinity everything is, by *definition,* connected."

She looked at Hal. "Don't give him any more of that snooty French red. He's cut off."

"This is only my second glass."

She looked me up and down. "Looks like one was enough."

"You don't think everything in the universe is connected?"

"Yeah . . . but as they say in *Animal Farm,* some things are more connected than others. And by the way, didn't cause and effect put a man on the moon?"

"Not in the grander scheme. In the grander scheme there's *always* been a man on the moon, and there always *will* be."

"Are you gonna find Lenny's wife or not?"

"Yeah, but I'm just *telling* you that this notion of finding some

weird *connection* behind your haphazardly assembled events is not that *keen* a possibility in my mind, nor that high a *priority* when it comes to finding Mrs. *Cascade.*"

The music stopped, and I realized I had been leaning into her and speaking with some amount of projection. I can get loud when I'm in the middle of a philosophy or two. She just patted my arm.

"Well, okay, but don't be surprised if you're wrong."

I settled back in my seat and sighed out a long breath. "Dally . . . okay. I know." Then, slowly, "I've been wrong so many times in my life that the power such a circumstance may have had to astonish me as a youth has long since lost its power. I am no longer amazed by my virtuosity in the realm of error."

"Thataboy. Keep humble. That's what counts."

And she was off to the bandstand to tell everybody how great it was to have such swell guest artists in the place. I polished off my second wine listening to her and the honey of her voice. My mind drifted way back to the day President Kennedy was shot. I was remembering how everybody else at the grammar school was crying or white-faced in shock, and Dally looked over at me, squinting, and said, real quiet, "See?"

# 5

# *Soul Food*

There's a certain time of night you don't feel like diner food. Sometimes you've got to have something for the spirit, or I do anyway. That's the time to trundle on over to the Golden Potala. It's run by a family with an unpronounceable name that got out of Tibet, if you can imagine, somewhere around '59, just before the Red Chinese muscled into their country and took over. How they got to Atlanta was a mystery even to me, and I'd been dining with them on and off for years. I just knew that the family had come south in the jumpy seventies and settled into a corner café not that far from Easy.

The old guy who owned the place had taught fencing or some such in Tibet. Here in the good old U.S. of A. he was a fry cook. He had a daughter who had grown up in Atlanta, danced ballet—and was the greatest waitress in the western hemisphere. She looked like royalty, cool as snow. She moved between the tables like a quiet stream flowing in between big old moss-covered rocks. The first time I saw her I thought she had the most mysterious, fragile face I'd ever seen. I was afraid to speak to her. Then she opened her mouth. It was like magnolia late on a spring night, just the right trace of a Southern accent, slow and warm. I thought then that she'd invented the concept of tranquillity. I think I even asked her out a couple of times in the early days, but it never seemed to work. Maybe it was the language barrier.

The decor helped to emphasize that. The whole family was working, little by little, to get some of their more precious home furnishings and scattered pieces of religious art out of Tibet since the Reds stepped up all the pressure to be more like Mao. See, to the Red Chinese, religion is like opium: makes a country dull. The Red Chinese, they just think they're cleaning up a drug problem, or so they say. But when it's your religion you don't look at it that way. So what family there was left in Tibet kept finding and sending things to the family here in Atlanta. They were beautiful little things, fans and coral carvings and flower petals made from carved wood that looked like they still had morning dew all over them. The overall effect was like walking into a church. The whole place was lit with candle-lamps on each table. It was like a holy place, only you could get chow. Great concept for a guy like me. Plus, they never closed.

The daughter drifted toward me like a swan on the lake.

"Hey, Flap." I was a regular. They all knew my name, and none of that phony changing *R*'s for *L*'s either. They'd all learned to speak the language right the first time.

"Hey, Linda." Her name wasn't really Linda. *Ling Liu,* or something like it, but everybody called her Linda. America rubs off on everything.

She patted my shoulder. "You look puzzled, the way you used to. Don't tell me you're working again . . . at last."

That's the kind of regular I was. They even noticed subtle changes in my demeanor. "Yeah. That's somethin', huh?"

"Yeah, Miss Dally told me she finally got you up off your lazy backside."

I smiled. "Oh, Dally told you, did she? Well, steady, sister. I think I could make a fair argument that my *front* side is every bit as lazy as the other one."

She nodded. "Good one, Flap."

"Okay, I need something that's gonna help my concentration."

"You been off your game for a while, huh?"

"Year and a half—they tell me."

Shook her head. "That Neena. You better off."

"Tell me somethin' I don't know."

"You don't know that sesame and pepper and a certain combination of special spices make the cabbage and rice just what you need tonight."

"If you say so I'll have it. What's it called?"

"What do you care? You couldn't pronounce it anyway." She

slapped my shoulder gently again and skated off toward the kitchen, calling out something to her old father in the musical language she was born with.

The food at the Golden Potala wasn't the greatest-tasting food in the world to me, exactly, but anybody with half a brain could tell a difference in things after they'd eaten something there. The food went right to your soul, shaking it up with the hot pepper, soothing it with the perfect rice, forcing it to spin like a kid's top with the subtle interchange of flavors. The food was like a perfect breath, purest water, clear light at the top of the world.

Into such a reverie the father intruded. "Flap. What you thinking about?"

"Food."

He misunderstood. "Be here in a minute. You can listen to me?"

"Okay."

He sat at the table. "My brother." Like that was the end of the story.

I waited, finally had to ask. "What about him?"

"Linda says you working again."

"Right."

"Then you got to help my brother. He's got trouble."

I shifted in my seat. "Love to, but I got a job right now. It's gonna take a while."

"My brother can't wait. He's got big trouble."

"Like what?"

The old guy lowered his voice and leaned in. "He saw a demon-man. The demon make him do something the wrong way."

Now, ordinarily I'm a guy who'll go along with most anything for a laugh, but this one really got me. Just a little too much of a coincidence considering what I thought I'd seen just yesterday in Teeth and Ruby's backyard.

So I had to say out loud the only obvious response: "Huh?"

The old guy sat back up straight. "Oh, he look just like a man, but you can tell this man is not right, not . . ." searching for the words. "This is many men in one body."

I nodded. "It's not that it doesn't sound like fun, but like I said, Dally's got me another gig, and you know I gotta do what she's asked me to do first."

He looked down. "I know. Miss Dally come the first."

"But, when I get done with this job . . ."

He smiled, but it was the smile of somebody who was watching his own house burn down. "By then? Too late."

He shoved himself up from the table and shuffled away without another word. I had to feel bad.

Linda came a minute later with a hot bowl and a pair of chopsticks. She set them down, poured some tea, and patted me again. "It's okay, Flap. You came in here for some food, not another problem."

I looked up at her. "Yeah. But, you know, when it rains it pours. I mean, I don't have work for months and months, and now I got two jobs I feel like I gotta take."

She nodded. "It wouldn't be so bad for us if it was just the family here, but it's involved."

"Like how?"

"The family at home is in trouble."

"In Tibet?"

She shook her head. "My uncle is in with somebody bad, and it involves the family at home. I don't even know the whole story, but you know my father. He doesn't worry that much."

"Yeah."

She stood. "So eat. Don't let it get cold."

I stared into the kitchen. "Look, tell your father I *gotta* go do some work for Dally tomorrow, but I'll be back and we'll talk. I can't promise anything more than I'll get to it when I can. You know what me and Dally got goin'."

She smiled one of those smiles that convinces a guy that women know everything. "I know better than you do." And she was off.

I stared down at my rice. The steam was filling the air around my head, warming my face, and relaxing the muscles there. I picked up the chopsticks and started in on the food. The first bite told me that Linda'd been right about what I needed. It wasn't the taste so much as the effect it had. I started seeing everything very clearly. I started thinking I could do anything I had a mind to.

I left the Golden Potala thinking that now I had two different cases and I could handle them both better than anybody alive. Isn't it funny the way you never know how things are really going to work out—even after a good meal?

# 6

# *That Pretty Buick*

Since I'd gone to bed fairly early—for me—and slept like the dead, I got up about ten the next morning. I wanted to call the lawyer Davidson, maybe see could I get some tips on business investing, now that I was coming into a little Cascade money of my own. I really didn't want to *drive* downtown. Nobody does. It's all one-way streets going opposite the way you need to go. Not to mention if you stay more than a half hour after 5:00 P.M., the whole joint's a ghost town. It's like the apocalypse. Oh, the Downtown Partners keep saying it's all going to be revitalized, but it'll never be like it was when I was a kid: a great big old small town. Now it's all business. They call it the city too busy to hate. Atlanta loves business—and sporting events, and dining out at mid-priced restaurants. The symbol of the city is a phoenix because Sherman burned it down in what some call the Great War of Northern Aggression. Trouble is, like they say happens to kidnap victims, Atlanta got the idea that burning it down every once in a while was just what a city needed, so they keep tearing down all the old stuff and building up some god-awful slick new soulless edifice. You're hard-pressed to find anything over twenty years old. Whenever anybody complains, the word *profit* is tossed around a lot. It's why they also call it the city too busy to care.

So I was hoping a phone call would do the trick.

"Davidson, Peters, and Conner."

"Hi. Calling Mr. Davidson."

"May I tell him who's calling?"

"Flap Tucker. I'm representing Mr. Cascade in some personal matters here in Atlanta at the moment." No need to say *which* Mr. Cascade.

"Can you hold?"

"Sure."

Music. Why do they force you to listen to music when the waiting is irritating enough all by itself?

"Hello, this is Harold Davidson."

"Mr. Davidson? Flap Tucker. I'm helping Mr. Cascade with some personal matters—"

"Not Charles."

"No. Leonard."

"I see."

"And I was wondering—"

"What's the nature of your *help,* Mr. Tucker, do you mind my asking?"

"Don't mind at all. Lenny's wife is missing."

"You've been retained under the auspices of a"—papers on his desk rustling—"Ms. Oglethorpe. Mr. Cascade—Charles Cascade—is aware of this situation. How may I help you?"

"Are there Cascade Art Imports offices in Atlanta?"

"No."

That was it? Just *no?* "So you only—"

"Mr. Cascade relies on us from time to time with regard to his business dealings in Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston—that sort of thing."

Not much to go on. "Business dealings?"

"They're in the importing business."

Right. "Importing?" Playing dumb can get something going a lot of times. Plus, I'm a natural at it.

"They import things."

So sometimes it gets you nowhere too. One more shot. "Like food—or what?"

"Is this germane to your investigation?"

Pleasant as I could be. "Well, I'll tell you what—everything is germane at this point. In fact, I'm talking to your wife next." Why not? Take a shot.

Worked. "My wife? What's the point of that?"

"Never can tell what you might find. I'm actually pretty good at

this once I get wound up. Ask around; there's plenty that think I'm aces. Now, about Mr. Cascade's business—"

"How do you spell your first name, Mr. Tucker? Is it with an *F*?"

"*F-L-A-P.* You're really not gonna give me the time of day, are you?"

"I don't see why I should."

I was increasingly nicer. "Well, the reason you should is because it makes me nervous that you're *not* helping. It says to me that you got something to hide. It says to me that there's more here than meets the eye. It says to me that you're an uncooperative sort who has reason to keep things from me, things I want more than ever to find out. Thanks for winding me up, pal. And by the way, where you from, Mr. Davidson?"

Beat. "Bloomington . . . Indiana. Why?"

I smiled at him through the phone so hard he could feel it in his office. "Me? I was born here in Georgia."

"And?"

"And I rest my case."

*Click.* There's a certain satisfaction comes from hanging up on a lawyer like that guy. Absolutely nothing to be gained from him but irritation of the stomach lining. I needed to get with somebody I could actually *talk* to. Somebody real. So I trundled out to my little car and headed to Buckhead.

I wanted to see the parking lot where the girls had been found, then head over to the wrong side of town to the Tip Top. Isn't it funny how the south side is always the wrong one? I think it comes from a universal prejudice against all things southern. Even up in Yankee land the south side of Chicago is the roughest. I grew up in southwest Atlanta, and it surely was meaner than Buckhead and points north.

So I headed north up Peachtree Street, past the High Museum of Art, past the big St. Philip's Episcopal Cathedral, turned in at one of the few "art" cinemas in town—Atlanta's genteel code for dens of pornography—and there I was in Buckhead. The day had clouded over and the sky looked like snow, even though snow in November would be a remarkable rarity. Still, it was a snow sky. Everything was gray in the dim light. I might have been in another city than the one I'd been in the day before.

In the parking lot of the "art" cinema there were still those yellow police ribbons in a corner of the asphalt, but the car and its contents were, of course, long gone. I glanced up at the marquee. *Big Wiggly Jeeters* was playing. I think it was by Bergman.

I ought to have known better, but I went in anyway to ask the ticket taker if she'd seen anything.

"Eight dollars."

"Don't wanna see the movie. I'd like to ask you some questions."

She was wise. "About the girls in the trunk."

"Uh-huh."

"I wasn't here."

"Who was?"

"I mean, the car got parked there after we closed."

"At?"

"We closed at four A.M., like always."

"And it was there when you got in?"

"I dunno. You insurance?"

"Why do you say that?"

" 'Cause you look too *smart* to be a cop."

"Had a bad experience with the police, have we?"

"Kiddin'? Look where I work. Once when they came in here and raided? Some guy told me it didn't matter that all I did was sell tickets, he was gonna arrest me anyway. He says, 'If you lay down with dogs, you get up with fleas.' I mean, what an awful thing to say."

"Yeah."

"I never boinked a dog."

"No, I'd guess not—but for the record, that's not what he was saying. He was just saying you were guilty by association. He meant the *owner* of this place is a dog."

"Oh . . ." She shrugged. "Well, I *did* boink him."

"There you go."

She thought for a second. "That makes me feel better."

"I'm glad."

" 'Cause I never boinked a *dog*."

"Right. About the car . . ."

"I told the police. I said I didn't even notice it."

"Well . . . who exactly did notice it, do you know? I mean, how did they even know the girls were in there?"

"The owner."

"Hmm?"

"Jerry, the owner. He gets all cheesed at these people who park in our lot and go shopping all these other places, so he told me to call and have it towed. It happens all the time."

"Really."

"Yeah, he said it was there, like, all night, he thought, and when it was still there the next day he told me to have it towed."

"So you called."

"Yeah, and the guy who comes to tow it? This is the third car he's found with a body in it."

"Jesus."

"That's what I said. He's been towing for thirty-seven years, and this is the third time."

"He told you this?"

"Yeah. Like I said, we call him all the time. He's nice. Anyway, he goes to hook up the chains? And then he gets a whiff of the trunk, I guess, and the experience of the man kicks in, you know?"

"Right."

"And he comes in, then, and says, 'Kay, I gotta use the phone, I think we got a body in that car.' And I say, 'Get outta here!' And he says, 'I smelled it. My third one.' And I say, 'Jesus,' and he dials 911."

"He smelled it?"

"Yeah, turned out it was two bodies. Two girls. I guess you knew that."

"Uh-huh."

"You're not insurance, what are you?"

"Missing persons."

"Oh." She thought about something—maybe something from her own life. "Must be sad."

"Sometimes."

"Who were they?"

"They were just girls. They danced at a club in south Atlanta, and they were getting their real estate licenses."

"Wow. You never know, do you?"

"Nope. Not once."

We gabbed another couple of minutes, but I couldn't stop thinking how you wouldn't be able to smell a dead body, or even two, in this weather—unless they'd been in that trunk for a while.

I didn't mention it to her though. "Mind if I come back in a day or two? I gotta go over to where they worked and all, but I might think of something else."

She shrugged. "They tell me it's a free country."

I stuck out my hand. "My name is Flap Tucker."

"Hey, Flap. I'm Kay."

"Hey."

"So this isn't some line. You really are looking for the two girls or something."

"Uh-huh. I guess a lotta guys hit on you in this line of work."

"It falls into two types, actually: one, the type that thinks I'm easy,

and the other, the type that's embarrassed to be here. They don't even make eye contact, you know? Let alone talk to me."

"Besides"—I pointed to her ring—"you're married."

She looked down at her left hand. "Nah, that's just a creep guard."

"Ah." I flashed her a smile. "Of course, now it won't work with me."

She shrugged again. "You're not a creep." It wasn't an invitation, just a statement of fact.

I started to tell her just how much a matter of opinion *that* was, but a customer came in, and I stepped away from the counter. The guy was of the second variety she had described. He looked at the countertop like it was the Sistine Chapel, got his ticket, and zoomed inward toward the darkness. The doors to the theater opened long enough for us to hear the sounds of gasping and groaning.

She rolled her eyes. "See what I gotta live with?"

I shook my head. "It's not easy."

"Neither am I."

"So you said. I meant life."

"I know." She sighed and looked out the thick glass doors to the parking lot. "That sure was a big, pretty Buick those girls had. Reckon how much a car like that would cost?"

I shook my head. "Too much for them. I don't think it was their car."

"Whose car . . . Jesus! You mean that car belonged to the guy that . . . Jesus! And he was right out there in the . . . *Jesus!*"

"Don't figure on a girl like you being so religious."

"I *know,* but . . ."

"Somebody had to drive the car here. And they weren't really in a position . . ."

And, kind of unexpectedly, it was her turn to giggle. "Yeah." She laughed again. "Can't drive a Buick from the trunk, can you?"

I looked out at the lot too. "Nope. No, you can't."

"Especially"—softer—"especially if you're, like, dead."

"Right."

She looked away from the parking lot then and said again, "Must be sad." She looked up at me. "Must be sad work you gotta do sometimes. People are missing for . . . all sorts of reasons, aren't they? I mean, people leave home and come to Atlanta and get a crummy job and stuff for . . . all sorts of reasons, I guess."

I nodded. "All sorts. But sometimes, when I find somebody who's missing or some stuff of theirs that they lost? It's pretty great then. It

makes 'em real happy. And then they're reunited and all, and everybody cries, and it's pretty great."

"What if . . ." She tapped on the counter a second. "What if you find somebody and they don't wanna be found?"

"Yeah, that happens sometimes. Nobody I ever met wants to be lost, but one or two didn't really want to be *found*—not by me, anyway."

"Too embarrassed to go home?"

I nodded, still kind of smiling at her. "Or scared, or . . . you know, just . . . different. That-was-then-this-is-now sorta thing."

She sighed. "Yeah. What's that expression? Water under the bridge, or something."

"Right."

"What's that mean exactly?"

"Time's like a river. It never stands still."

"Boy, *that's* the truth. One day you're a kid and the next day you're twenty-seven."

I looked her in the eye, maybe a little more than she wanted me to. "Look. Twenty-seven is still a kid—from where I'm standin'."

She smiled back and swatted the side of my arm. "Oh, like you're ancient."

"Feelin' kinda old today."

"Yeah." She looked out the doors again. "You're huntin' down missing persons, who you lookin' for? The girls already got found." Then her eyes got bigger and she turned to me. "Jesus, you're not looking for the guy, are you?"

"The guy that did it? Nah. I'm actually looking for another guy's wife, but my . . . boss thinks this thing with the Buick has something to do with it."

"Does it?"

"Not that I can tell. But she's not wrong all that often—not about this stuff."

"You got a lady boss?"

I smiled. "*Boss* is probably the wrong word. She got me the job, is all."

"Still . . ." She was kind of teasing me. "You called her your boss. She your girlfriend or something?"

"No. We're much better than that."

"Wow." She nodded, but she didn't understand. "So . . . you married?"

"Divorced."

"Ohh." She said it like it explained something to her, then shifted in her seat. "How old are you?"

"Older than you."

"That's not old for a man."

"What's old?"

"Seventy."

"Then you're right. I'm not old."

"And you don't look older than me. You got a youngish-looking face and you're not fat."

"Don't have enough money to be fat."

"Brother, is *that* right."

I tapped the countertop. "Welp. Gotta go over to the other side of town. Like I said, I might have to come back. . . ."

She looked down. "That'd be good."

I took in a little breath. "Look. None of my business—at all—but, you know, it's coming up on the festive holiday season and everything. . . . Why don't you give the folks back home a call? They'd . . . I think they'd be happy to hear from you."

She was still looking down. "No, they wouldn't."

I buttoned my coat. "Well . . . none of my business." I shoved the door open and a cold trumpet of air played in.

She finally looked up. " 'Bye."

I waved. " 'Bye, Kay."

The wind was blowing pretty hard out in the parking lot, and those yellow police ribbons were whipping around like they were lightning. I shuffled over to the place where the car had been, and there were dead leaves and newspapers and Styrofoam cups all zipping around the edges of the buildings—and something caught my eye. I tapped away some gunk from under a drainpipe with my toe, close to where the car had been parked, and there it was: a little chain with hearts on it, too big for a wrist, too little for a neck—exactly like the one I had in my pocket from Ruby's backyard the day before.

I couldn't believe it. I bent down to pick it up, and it was only a partial chain—the rest was gone—but it was just the same. I took the other one out of my pocket and compared. And as I was standing there with the cold wind knocking me around and the gray sky threatening to rain or maybe even snow, I could see the lovely, irritating face of Dalliance Oglethorpe saying, "See?"

# 7

## *Tip Top*

The drive to southwest Atlanta can be all highways or all little surface roads, and I always avoid the fast way if I can. Riding all the way back down Peachtree, through downtown, past the old meat-packing plant, through the fifties-era projects, into West End, you turn onto Cascade Road, where I grew up. I'd driven on it a thousand times, but all of a sudden two plus two was roughly in the fourish neighborhood, and I made a mental note to ask my new friend Mr. Davidson sometime about its connection with international importing—or maybe just mention it to Lenny the next time I saw him.

Atlanta's a funny place, at least geographically speaking: You have to go through West End to get to East Point—which is further *south.* Maybe it's a religious thing: In Christ there *is* no east or west.

If you turn onto Adams Drive you go by the Adams Park Library, where I got my first book on mythology. It was a story about Baldar. He was the beloved of the Viking gods, but some other guy shot him through the heart with a stick of mistletoe. The mistletoe used to be a big tree, like an oak, but it got cursed because it was an instrument of death—and that's also how come we're supposed to kiss under it, to remember this guy Baldar that everybody loved so much. It's basically the same story we have in the south about the dogwood tree. Once it was big like an oak tree, but it was used to make the cross, the one

Jesus got hung on. So after that it got demoted. Still, it got to have the beautiful blossoms—in the shape of a cross. I'm not suggesting that Norse mythology and Georgia folklore have all that much in common, but it's just too big a world to think that coincidence doesn't mean *anything*. So my head was putting in overtime trying to figure how two identical kid necklaces fit the strangled-topless-dancer-drag-queen-pentagram picture. It occupied my mind all the way past Campbellton Plaza and into a part of town where a place like the Tip Top gave the rest of the surroundings class.

It was a nondescript, gray building. A neon sign with a smiling blonde was the only identification. The gravel parking lot was nearly empty. It was only about two in the afternoon, getting colder—and the Tip Top didn't strike me as the kind of place you'd want to go for a bowl of soup and some peace and quiet, maybe a little Miles on the stereo—which is what *I* would like on a day such as this one. But it was my lot in life to barge into the lion's den instead.

And barge I did, through the swinging doors into the smoky, dim light of iniquity—into the waiting room of shame.

"Ten bucks." The bouncer was a burly chap, big as a boulder—looked about as bright as one too.

"What's it gonna cost me to talk to you?" I had to lean over close to his head so he could hear me over the music, a funky little number called, as I gathered from the chorus, "Bang Bang Bang."

"You have not *got* enough to talk to me, but it's only ten bucks to get in *there*." And he shoved his big thumb over his shoulder.

"You must be really interesting to talk to." I shelled out the dough onto the little table between us.

He nodded, stone-faced, picking up the money. "I'm enchanting."

"You know Teeth?"

Finally he smiled. "The fairy? Sure. Great guy. Why didn't you say Teeth was a pal?" And he shoved back my two fives. Then he zoomed me up and down like a vacuum cleaner. "You don't look like a fairy."

"What do I look like?"

"A dick."

"You think I'm a P.I.?"

"I do."

"Well, I gotta say—and I'm hoping you'll take this as a compliment since that's how I mean it—you really are smarter than you look."

He nodded, not the least offended. "It's an advantage I got in life."

"So what am I here to talk about?"

"Teeth and his boyfriend, the guy that got zotzed in his own backyard—which may I say it's tough when you go and get it in your own backyard—or you wanna talk about the girls."

"If I ever think of taking on a partner in my line of work—"

But he stopped me; shook his head. "Too dangerous."

"Like *your* line of work is a piece of cake."

He smiled again. And it was, in fact, an enchanting smile. "I got Teeth. He'd bite his own mother's arm off if she was causin' trouble in here. All I gotta do is make sure he don't kill somebody."

"Maybe a poor choice of words . . . if I'm here to talk about the girls."

"Teeth wouldn't do a thing like that. That was a sex thing."

"What?"

"That's what I think."

"Really."

"Look, I really didn't know them girls all that well. Why'n'cha go on in and talk to some of the other ones, if they're not on—and if they feel like it—and if you don't look at 'em wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Starin' at the chest-a-cological regions. A woman don' like that. She wants eye contact. You'd be surprised, but that's the main complaint: no eye contact."

"You're a good judge of character. Am I a gentleman or not?"

Then he got me in a vice grip of a stare—like he was in a trance for a second or two. Finally he blinked. "What are you, older than you look?"

"Just about."

"So you look younger."

"So I'm told."

"Divorced."

"It shows?"

"To me it does."

"What else?"

"You a Libra?"

I nodded.

"A divorced Libra dick."

"With whom the girls are . . ."

"Sadly, quite safe."

"Great. Thanks."

He shrugged. "It's a gift."

"By the way, in the current social climate we generally prefer the appellation 'private investigator' to the more old-fashioned 'dick.' "

He was wise. He nodded. "Since the Nixon thing."

You can see how that could crack a guy like me up. "Yeah . . . since Nixon."

He appreciated my laughter for a moment, then slipped out his hand from behind the little table with the cash box. "Tony—if you need anything."

I shook his hand, like we were on a reception line. "Flap—and I may need another laugh on the way out."

He nodded. "See what I can do."

I stepped into the nether room. The music was growling and the lights were surreal. I made it to the bar, took one of many empty seats. The bartender was there instantly, topless, chewing gum, tough as nails.

I stared so determinedly into her eyes that I think I made her a little nervous. "Could I get a screwdriver without the vodka?"

"You just want the juice?"

I smiled. "Yeah, but it sounds better to say 'screwdriver without the vodka.' "

"To who?"

"Okay."

She didn't move a muscle. "I gotta charge you for the screwdriver anyway."

"It's worth it not to have to drink the vodka, don't you think?"

But my charm was lost on her. She stayed eye-locked for another second, trying to determine if I was a troublemaker—or just a loser. Then she shoved off to fetch my beverage.

The music was something out of Duke Ellington's personal hell: crushing, mindless, as sophisticated as a cement mixer—bass cranked so high you could *feel* it screw with the natural rhythm of your heart. The new number was called, I believe, "Baby Baby," those being the only two words in the song I could make out.

Our friendly bartender brought my eight-dollar orange juice, kept the ten I handed her, and disappeared into the smoke at the other end of the bar. I headed toward the "show."

These places aren't usually like what you see in the movies. There are no guys going "woo!" and being generally boisterous. They're as quiet as the grave. Every so often a young buck'll up and saunter toward the runway with a bill folded lengthwise in his hand. The girl on the runway—wearing nothing but a store-bought smile, a sleeve

garter on her thigh, and a terrifically uncomfortable pair of high heels—cootchees over and kind of kneels where the guy can reach her. Then the guy—looking at the carpet, usually—shoves the bill in the garter, the girl winks, stands, and heads back up the runway.

These runways are set like high-fashion jobs, about fifteen feet long, one end jutting into the crowd at about shoulder level to the seated patron, the other end running under a curtain. Behind the curtain is the bull pen, the dressing rooms, the coffee machine. I caught the eye of Tony the Boulder, he nodded, waved at his colleague beside the curtain, and I headed backstage.

I'd been backstage at an off-Broadway house; I'd been backstage at the Fabulous Fox in Atlanta; I even went into a trailer at the circus once: It's all the same. No matter what the show is out front, a dressing room's a dressing room. The mythology's gone, the fluorescents are bright, the mirrors have little notes and cards and pictures on them: boyfriends, babies, parents. I was thinking how these kids weren't that much different from any performers since the beginning of the business, how they were heirs to Sophocles and Shakespeare, when I got a pretty sharp jab in the ribs.

"What the hell are you doin' back here?"

There is, in fact, no business like show business, and no people like show people. She was dressed like the rest backstage: bikini, slippers, cigarette—with the painful addition of a mop handle that she held like a lance, like a knight in a joust.

I rubbed my side where she'd jabbed me. "Tony sent me. Actually, Teeth sent me."

She hoisted her weapon away from me and flashed a smile like a ten-year-old kid. "Teeth. Where is he? We been missin' him somethin' awful."

The dancer who'd just been on the runway shoved past me, naked as that proverbial jaybird, before I could answer. " 'Scuse me, pops." Then, to my companion, "Tisha . . . you're, like, supposed to be on!"

She dropped her mop. "Oh, right." She touched my arm. "Be right back." Then, to her naked friend, "This is Teeth's new boyfriend or something." And she was gone.

My new little friend looked me up and down and shook her head. "You're not Teeth's new boyfriend."

"I didn't say I was. That was just Tisha's guess."

"She's not bright."

I nodded. "Not as bright as Tony."

"Tony knows everything."

"I think you're right. My name's Flap."

She shrugged, folded her arms in front of her, but otherwise made no move.

I maintained eye contact. "So I don't look like Teeth's new boyfriend?"

She squinted. "In the first place, Teeth ain't got over Ruby yet. In the second place, you dress like crap—and in the third place, aren't you a little old for the boy?"

"Not to mention that he's not the least bit queer." Tony had appeared over my left shoulder. He smiled a cold smile at my current companion. "But he's here to help Teeth, so be nice."

I turned to Tony. "Here to help Teeth?"

"It's my guess that the cops will eventually realize a dead boyfriend and two dead dancers got one thing in common—namely our friend Teeth. They'll investigate, but you see through this coincidence. You don't believe that Teeth did it."

I shifted my weight and took a step toward him. "Whata ya got, a crystal *ball*? How do you *know* all this stuff?"

"This stuff is important. You gotta be a keen student of human nature, much like myself."

"Plus, you're enchanting."

"That too." He looked over at our girl. "So like I said, be nice, okay?"

She looked down and said, very sweetly, "Okay, Tony."

And suddenly I saw Tony the Boulder as every girl's dream brother, filled with tough but unconditional love. He pivoted and took a seat beside the curtain. I could see, through it, that the other guy had traded places with him and was standing at the door. Tony took his seat and didn't look back, but he was there, close by—just in case all his instincts about me were off. And I had to admire that too. He was certain he was right—but what if he wasn't? I could be as rotten an egg as they come. It's not such a bad idea to cover all the bases if you can.

Without looking he called to me through the curtain, like he'd read my mind. "I saw Tisha poke you with the mop, and I thought maybe you could use the help."

I parted the curtains. "What makes you think I'm gonna find something important in this deal? And just what would that something be, do you think?"

He still didn't look at me. His eye was on the crowd. "It's a real sick world we got out there right now, Flap. Those girls, they were just kids. They didn't deserve to get shoved in a trunk. And Ruby . . . he

was quite something else. We can't let this kind of thing happen so much. You look to me like a man who could maybe do something about it. And so I *want* you to do something about it. That's all."

And then, like that was an explanation of everything that had transpired, he looked at me and winked.

I stared back. "Without knowing it, you are some kind of distant kin to a woman name of Dalliance Oglethorpe."

He shrugged. "She owns the Easy on Ponce. Never met."

Now, Atlanta's a big place, but the club scene is a family just like any other, and it was no surprise that he'd heard of Dally. Her joint was a hangout for many a wayward soul. I decided, however, against explaining to him the connection I saw between his own big old self and my best friend in this admittedly real sick world.

Instead, I forged bravely ahead into the belly of the beast. Four or five girls were lounging in the big dressing room, including the one I'd just met. I cleared my throat and caught her eye.

"My name's Flap. And I really am kind of a friend to Teeth. I'm . . . looking to find out more about Hanna and Donna . . . or whatever their real names were."

The place got pretty quiet. The girl I was looking at kind of slumped in her chair. "We try not to talk about them . . . Flap."

"I'd imagine, but I wanna help."

Another dancer, in a black bathrobe, lit a cigarette. "You from their folks? I thought their folks might send somebody. I thought something like this would happen."

The other one sat up a little. "Naw, he's insurance."

Bathrobe girl shook her head. "He's not insurance. He's too interesting-looking to be insurance. You're not insurance, are you, hon?"

Naked girl rolled her eyes. "Jeez, Beano, he's old enough to be your dad."

Beano shrugged. "I didn't say I wanted a *date*, I just said—"

"That I was interesting-looking, which I'll grant you, but I really want to know a little something about . . . the other two."

Beano took a deep drag on her smoke and poked her finger at the chair next to her. I took it.

She flicked her ash onto the floor. "I knew 'em pretty good account of I'm here all the time so I know everybody pretty good is why you should be talking to me about Donna and Hanna which I don't know what was their real names or whatever." She blinked.

"They were new?"

She nodded very enthusiastically. "They just worked here . . .

what . . . three months *outside* and they weren't really into it, you know, because they didn't really like the guys at all, or whatever, but they needed the dough until they got their real estate diploma what-chacallit."

"Didn't like which guys?"

"*Guys* guys, they didn't like *guys.* Every once in a while they'd date some fat little blond guy who helped 'em out with the school thing, but otherwise they were completely into each other. I thought you would know that." She seemed irritated at my ignorance. "They were a couple." She sucked on her cig again, talked through the smoke. "I thought you would *know* that."

Naked girl said, "Beano, you gotta get ready."

Beano looked down at some kind of list or notes on her part of the dressing table and nodded. "I'm up in a minute. Better talk fast." She shivered out of her robe in a flash and started powdering herself.

"Donna and Hanna were an item?"

"Yes, God—didn't we just go over this? They were fishwives, they were landlubbers, they were *thespians*! Plus, all that long strawberry-blond hair everywhere—yooo!" She looked at me. "That's a joke, *thespians.*"

"Yeah. Did they live together?"

"Of course. God."

"Where?"

"The Alhambra."

"The *which* one?"

"Alhambra *Alhambra,* like in Spain. It's all—what's that crap—Mediterranean architecture and whatnot. Stucco." She shivered in disgust.

"And this place is . . ."

She smeared on lipstick. ". . . just around the corner. If you're any good you could *spit* on it from here."

"In which direction would I spit?"

She stood. "Out the driveway to the right. You sure are slow for a . . . whatever it is you are. Damn." She slithered into a bikini, patted my cheek kind of hard, and reached over to a corner of a Baggie on her countertop. She stabbed her little fingernail into the stuff and held it under my nose. "This oughta speed things up a little."

I stood up too. "No, thanks. I'm trying to save room for dessert."

She shrugged. "Whatever." Then she shoved the fingernail way up in her own right nostril and sniffed like a bloodhound. She wreaked the same havoc on the other side of her nose, tied up the Baggie, tossed it

aside, pulled on her smoke one last time, and straightened my tie. "Always pays to look your best, hon."

"I do what I can."

"Me too. Well"—in a tiny voice—"it's show time."

And she zipped out the curtains and onto the runway.

Naked girl giggled. She wasn't naked anymore though. She had on a plaid flannel robe. "Maybe I shoulda warned you about Beano."

I smiled. "You'd think the name alone would be warning enough."

"She's okay."

"So I'm hoping you can add to her story."

"Not me. I didn't really know the kids. They were real lovey-dovey all the time, and it kind of got on my nerves. I'm thinkin' you got the high points."

*Lovey-dovey.* I chewed on the inside of my lip for a second before I reached into my coat pocket. I held out the little chains with the hearts on them. "You never saw these things before, did you?"

She leaned in, then back. "Lotsa times. A lotta girls wear ankle bracelets."

"Ankle bracelets."

She wasn't even looking at me. "Yeah. Those look like the pair Hanna and Donna had." She made a face and a funny voice. "Love chains."

"Unbelievable."

She leaned forward again, like she'd missed something the first time. "What?"

"I thought they were kids' necklaces, like for little kids. I couldn't figure out the size thing."

"You never saw an ankle bracelet?"

"I just never thought of it." I was staring at them like they were the Grail. "I wonder how I could find out for sure if they belonged . . ."

She got a bright idea. "They got all that fiber evidence crap in police science now. They can tell you anything!"

Still staring, I shook my head. "I try to . . . avoid the police as much as I can."

"Guy like you, don't you got some, I don't know, college friends or nothin'?"

"I do know a guy at Tech. . . ."

"There you go."

"Maybe."

"Where'd you find 'em, anyway?"

"Hmm?"

"Where'd you find the chains?"

"Oh, you know, lyin' around on the ground." One at Ruby's and the other in Buckhead—what the hell could *that* mean?

"Oh."

"And these really look like the ones Donna and Hanna used to have?"

She leaned over the table and checked out the merchandise one more time. "A lot. You see the one Beano was wearing?"

"She's got one too?"

"I'm tellin' ya, Flap, it's the rage. Doncha think they're kinda sexy and all?"

I looked down again at the things in my hand. "Not really."

"Yeah, well, imagine 'em on somebody's necked ankle, and it gets better."

"And Beano wears one like this?"

"Not exactly. Hers got little handcuffs all, like, linked up." She took a beat. "Don't ask."

"Don't want to." I shoved the items back in the pocket. "I'm gonna want . . . to talk some more. But I'm thinking I oughta go check out their pad."

"The Alhambra."

"Like in Spain."

"If you say so."

"You workin' tomorrow?"

"Nope."

"Beano?"

"Every day."

"And twice on Sundays."

"Just about."

"When are you here next, and what about Tisha?"

"I'm goin' to Florida. Tisha's here tomorrow."

"Florida?"

She looked down, adjusting her carrot-colored hair very deliberately. "Goin' south. Take a hint."

I nodded slowly.

She looked up, and all of a sudden she was just a kid. "I don't mind ridin' in the backseat, but the trunk's a little close for me, you know?"

"I know." I stood. "Have a nice time in Florida."

"Whatever."

*Gone south,* as in: to vanish. There it is again, that metaphorical

Yankee-land prejudice in everyday English. I lumbered out the curtain, a little confused by the light change and the thickness of the fabric, and there was good old Tony the Boulder, reading a magazine by the poorest light in the land.

I leaned over to his ear. "You'll go blind."

"I eat a lotta carrots."

And what was he reading, shipmates? A girly mag or the sporting news? Not in the least. It was a very fine periodical about gardening.

"Whata ya grow 'em yourself?"

He rocked back and forth a little, unconsciously in time to the music. "Sometimes. But I prefer perennials. If you do it just right you got color all season long."

"Really."

" 'Course, it's a lotta work at first, plantin' the damn things, what with your bulbs and your hostas and your daisies, and you hope the impatiens'll come back, which sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. But after a while all you gotta do is sit on the deck and admire."

"Yeah, but what do you do with your spare time then?"

"Start a new bed."

I shook my head. "Where does it all end?"

He closed up his mag. "It doesn't. Nature's work is never done."

"I see."

Up on the runway Beano and Tisha were "dancing" together, doing things I think could have shut the place down if there'd been a vice cop within fifty miles. But the crowd seemed to like it.

Tony stood up, admiring the dance. "Does my heart good to see young people enjoying themselves. You goin' over to Donna and Hanna's?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I got good ears too."

"What do you gotta eat for that?"

"Peppermint."

The music was so loud I didn't think I heard him right. "What?"

"Peppermint. Keeps the eustachian tubes clear."

"Does it."

He slipped the magazine into his back pocket and laid his big paw on my shoulder. "Take a right outta the parking lot, you can't miss it. The Alhambra, Apartment Two B."

"Yeah. You know I'll be back."

"Can't wait. Say hey to Teeth if you see him. We miss him."

I smiled, got my bearings, and waded through the empty tables to

the door. I'd like to say I didn't look back, but it was too much for me when the crowd actually started making noises—like in the movies. I was a pillar of salt. There were Beano and Tisha with vibrating candlesticks, applying them appropriately to one another. The crowd was on its feet. I think someone even hollered, "Author." But Sophocles and Shakespeare? They didn't take a curtain call that day.

# 8

# *The Alhambra*

Spain was once ruled by Moorish kings, and the country led the world in mathematics and architecture—the fortified palace at Granada, the Alhambra, being the foremost example of same. By 1492 the Catholics had taken over. Queen Isabella financed an expedition to another continent and, by the way, helped to start the Inquisition. Islam used to be a fairly peaceful religion, they tell me, until the Crusaders taught the Muslims a thing or two about how to spread a faith. They used to roast and eat Muslim babies in front of the parents in their quest to teach the gospel—and it produced a jihad the ramifications of which, I believe, we are still feeling today.

The Alhambra apartments in southwest Atlanta are a fine study in the old Moorish style: great sweeping arches, twisty columns, and thick, wedding-cake-style stucco. I might have just busted into 2B, but as luck would have it there was a resident manager.

I patted politely at the door, and a round woman in her fifties opened up. She nodded like she knew I was coming. "Two B." And she disappeared into the darkness of her rooms.

"How did you know?" I was beginning to think everybody in the world knew more than I did.

Her voice came back muffled from the deep recess of her little

cave. "Tony called." After a brief repose she was there again, key in hand. "He's so sweet. He really cares about those little girls."

"Yes, ma'am. Tony called you?"

"Just now. Said to let you in, doncha know."

"Um-hmm. Did he say why?"

"You're gonna help, aren't ya?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, good." She shoved past me and along the corridor to the stairs. "Those two were so cute. I think they were sisters or something, always wearing one another's clothes and whatnot. Always callin' the other one 'delicious' and 'honey bun' and . . . who in the world would want to put two nice girls like that in the trunk of a Buick?"

I followed her up the short staircase. "Who indeed."

She squinted at me over her shoulder. "I think it's one of those awful men that goes in that Tip Top place. We tried to get it out of the neighborhood, but this city is *run* by big old fat men with dinky little wienies."

"Really."

"Uh-huh. They can't stand up to take a pee; how they gonna stand up to organized crime?"

"Organized crime?"

She resumed her trek down the upstairs hall. "Who do you think runs all the necked clubs?"

"Businessmen?"

"They'd like you to think so." She stopped in front of 2B and shot me a look like out of a howitzer. "Look. I used to be a stripper in the sixties, when it *meant* something."

"Hmm?"

"When I showed my titties it was a statement."

"Really."

"That's right. I helped to open up this whole country. If it wasn't for me you'd still be livin' in the Eisenhower years."

"You and Lenny Bruce."

"You're damn right. But these places like the Tip Top"—she shoved the key into the lock like she was mad at it—"they got no sense of purpose." She threw open the door with the same disdain. "And these poor little girls, they got no purpose either."

The room was dark and bare, no pictures on the wall, no rugs on the floor, one chair in the middle of the room, some pillows around it. I flicked on the light, but it only made the place sadder. It was one big room, a kitchenette to the left, a bathroom beyond it.

She looked in too. "Cops didn't find nothin'—except that a lot of the stuff was gone from the apartment. They think maybe robbery, but these kids . . . look: They didn't have a thing in this world any self-respectin' thief would want."

On the sill of the only window in the room there were a couple of pictures in cheap frames. I wandered over. They were photos of the two young girls, one taken in a field like on a farm, one at a bar someplace.

I held one up. "These the girls?"

She sighed. "Yeah. That's them." She was still looking around the little empty space. "What did they do with their money?"

I clued her in. "They were in real estate classes."

"No kidding."

"I just thought you'd know that, you bein' a concierge—"

And this, of all things, made her laugh, like she was thinking of a funny movie or something. "My late husband, he was the resident manager . . ."

". . . but he died, and now you're the . . ."

". . . resident manager, yeah. Got nothin' to do with real estate. I never owned nothin' you couldn't eat at one sitting."

I shrugged, cast a hopeless eye about the place. In one corner there were two plastic laundry baskets, one purple, one red—both empty.

I peeked over into the kitchen area. There was a broom and a dustpan, some cleaning stuff on the counter, a frying pan half filled with pretty old corn bread.

She didn't want to come too far into the place. "Go see what's in the bath."

I nodded. The bathroom was tiled in splendor compared to the rest of the digs: alabaster walls trimmed in bloodred tiles that had a sort of viney design. It was huge, bigger than the kitchen. And it was spotless. There were two hairbrushes side by side on the sink counter and two towels—*hers* and *hers,* in very ornate scroll. The tub smelled like a flower garden.

I popped my head out. "This is some bathroom."

"Yeah, ain't it great? These places used to be apartments with eight or nine rooms in 'em, but the management couldn't rent in this part of town, so they chopped 'em up like a mall movie-plex and now you got a bunch of what they call efficiencies. But every once in while you hit one with a bathroom or a fireplace or a balcony—no extra charge either. I saw to that."

"I'd like to live in this bathroom."

"Well, it ain't rented yet."

I walked back out toward her. "So when was the last time you saw the girls here?"

"Oh . . . maybe a week or two—I dunno."

"What? They just found the bodies—"

"—three, four days ago, I know."

"Where were they all that time?"

"On vacation?"

"How often did they take a two-week vacation?"

"Um . . . never?"

"That's what I'd think."

"So you got an idea they might have been killed and not found right away."

"I really try not to have any ideas about a thing like this."

She looked around the room. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Is this sad or what?"

It was sad all right, but there was something eerie too. "This can't be all the stuff they had. I mean, where *did* they sleep? And where's the dresser or their clothes or shoes or other knickknacks and all?"

"Gewgaws."

"What?"

"I always liked the term *gewgaws* instead of *knickknacks.*"

"Yeah, well a rose by any other name would still beg the question—"

"—'Where are they?' The items in question."

I nodded once. "Exactly."

"So now you got an idea that maybe somebody came in here and cleared out some stuff, or maybe they did it themselves, even."

I turned to leave. "What'd I tell ya about that 'idea' business?"

She followed me. "Yeah, but I don't buy it. You got *idea* written all over you. You're a smart guy. You don't wanna be, but you can't help it."

"As opposed to a wise guy."

"Oh, I don't know. I think you're probably that too, in the right circumstances."

I ushered myself out the door. "Hey, you're not tryin' to flirt with me, are you?" I turned back to her, just as she was closing the door behind her, and raised my eyebrows.

She squinted again. "Buddy, if I was flirtin' with you, you'd know it."

I stuck out my lower lip in agreement. "Yeah, I'd imagine the whole county would know it."

"You better believe it. I was somethin' in my day."

I allowed her to pass me and followed her back down the stairs. Out the windows I could see the day getting darker, even though the afternoon was early. We stopped at her doorway.

She turned the key in her own door slowly. "Looks like snow, don't it?"

"Yup, but it won't."

"Naw. Not in November. I guess you'll be wantin' to come back and look around a little more after you got some ideas, huh?"

"Right. How'd you guess?"

"My late husband?"

"The resident manager . . ."

". . . had a brother did some insurance investigation. Used to talk about it in the old days."

"You know, I wish you'd quit talking about this 'old' stuff. You got nothin' on me in the age department."

"Oh really. I'm fifty-one."

"I got a *vest* older'n you."

She smiled. "That don't count. You got it at a thrift store, didn't ya?"

"Okay."

"Well, that's the diff. I'm expensive."

I smiled back. "And worth every penny too."

Out in the parking lot of the Alhambra the wind was whipping up fierce. At the site of the real Alhambra, in another land, a lot of followers of Mohammed would be turning toward Mecca about now to pray. They wouldn't do it because of any special problem or anything. It's something they do every day about this time—about the same time any good Crusader would be turning toward the wet bar, thinking about the first whiskey and soda of the evening.

# 9

# *The House of Pain*

It shouldn't really have been so dark on my drive back into town, but the day had given up by that time and gone home early. I was wishing I could do the same, but I wanted to check out GIMH. I stuck a hand in my coat pocket and fingered the picture Lenny had given me. I wanted to show it around, see if anybody knew her. What was it . . . *Augusta?* We have a town here in Georgia by that name. Might be interesting if that's where Lenny was born.

I entertained myself with thoughts like that as I drove past the theater on Cascade Road—maybe there was more Cascade money in Atlanta than we knew, and it would have to be old money in this part of town, where the Gordon Theater used to be. Saturday morning, for a quarter, you could see every Tarzan movie ever made. Now it's a thrift store. I think I might have bought my vest that's older than the resident manager of the Alhambra there.

It was night by the time I got to the mental hospital, mostly because of the cloud cover, not the hour. I pulled up into the visitors' parking and got a shot of déjà vu, like the kind that makes you sick. I mean the Big Sick, the ennui, the fear and loathing. It was probably just remembering coming to visit Neena there—or something.

I shoved in the door to the admitting area. The nurse recognized me.

"Hey, Flap. Long time no see."

"Yeah, well—would you come here if you didn't have to?"

"I hear you." She laughed.

"I gotta show a picture around, and I don't want a big *to-do* over it, do you know what I'm saying?"

"You don't want any of the doctors or, like, big staff guys around, because it's some kind of case deal you're working on and you don't want to have to hassle with that *confidentiality* crap."

"Confidentiality is the right of every citizen who comes to visit you all, and I'm a fine upstanding American."

"Let me see the picture."

I flashed it.

She sighed. "Oh. Her."

I really am smarter than I look. "So, I'm guessing you know her."

She looked up at me. "What is it with you, boy? You are a tramp *magnet.*"

"Really."

"Uh-huh. I happen to know from all kinds of experience that your ex was the god-in-hell-gypsy-queen of the tramps . . . but this one, she's not much better."

"Patient here?"

"Aggie? Naw, she was a nurse's assistant here, believe it or not. She wanted to be a psychologist, but she had some kind of horrendous problem; couldn't get through the day, let alone college."

"She worked here?"

"Like a horse. She was here maybe eighty hours a week. I think she slept here most nights. She really wanted to prove she could do better than anybody else."

"And?"

"And she did. She was better at this job than anybody else."

"And the tramp part comes in . . ."

"With some of the male patients." She leaned in and got real quiet. "She had some deal where sex was gonna cure these guys, you know?" She raised her eyebrows and leaned back.

"So she was doing this . . . activity in the name of . . ."

". . . curing the infirm."

"I see. And you caught her?"

"She had that sweet little Lenny Cascade in the X-ray lab behind all the lead panels in a posture I would not have thought humanly possible—and necked as the day they were born."

"And you said . . ."

"I said, 'What the hell is going on?' "

"And she said . . ."

"She just said she didn't know."

"When was this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"There were other times?"

"I'm sure of it. I think she even went to his house, wherever that would be."

"And she'd done this with other guys here?"

"What was to stop her?"

"But you saw it only with Lenny."

"And I wish to God I hadn't. You know how hard it is to get an image like that out of your unconscious?"

"Hey, just remember who you're talkin' to. I got unconscious images could choke a horse."

"Yeah." She settled back into her chair. "I guess you probably do."

"You said her name was . . ."

". . . Aggie. I think it was short for Augusta. Can you imagine?"

"And she doesn't work here anymore?"

"I saw to that." She was proud of it.

"Can't have people sleeping with the customers."

"I know it's a sore spot with you, Flap."

"Plus, you can't have a lowly little nurse's assistant working eighty hours a week and curing people all the time. Makes it harder on the rest of the staff."

"You're a cynic, wouldn't you say?"

"So, can I come in, talk to a few of the other guys and all, show 'em the pic?"

She looked around. "Most everybody you'd have to worry about is at dinner. And anyway, you made some friends here when Neena was in—who's to say you're not just back visiting?"

"Who indeed."

She buzzed under the counter, and a door popped. I nodded at her and went in. The main hall leads down to the general room where most of the orderlies hang out.

I poked my head in. One or two guys I knew were there. I waved. They nodded. One guy in particular had been especially fond of Neena.

"Hey, Scooter. What's up?"

"Hey, Flap. What in the hell are you doin' here?"

"Just came by to say hey."

"Like I believe that. Got some papers or somethin' to clear up?"

I beckoned him. "Take a look at this photo."

He shoved himself off the sofa and lumbered my way. He plucked the picture from my fingers, looked real close, and smiled.

"Aggie. Absolutely nuts. I always figured she got her little job here by boinkin' some doctor. Most of the staff here's wackier than the patients."

"You know her?"

"She used to work here." He handed me back the snapshot. "And you'll find this amusing. She hated Dr. Schlag."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. She was all mad about his methodology."

"Not happy?"

"Not happy."

"Methodology?"

He smiled. "You know me an' Dr. Schlag didn't see eye to eye on inpatient care either."

"Is that right."

"He thought that the girls ought to get better by him bein' nice to 'em and the boys ought to get shoved around a little and all."

"Wait. He wanted you to—"

"I'm not saying he wanted us to abuse the male patients, but he thought that a certain amount of physical . . . discipline was a good way to teach the guys about the highway of life or whatever."

"Say it again."

"Dr. Schlag thought the world was a rough sea, and women needed protection from it and men needed a few hard knocks to toughen 'em up."

"Jesus, what kind of a place *is* this? Augusta thinkin' she can boink 'em into health, and Nete Schlag thinkin' he can beat it into 'em."

"Welcome to my world."

"Is there, like, any *sane* person on staff here?"

"You're lookin' at him."

I smiled. "Thank God, huh?" I looked around. "And what about Teeth?"

He smiled. "Good old Teeth. Yeah. He was sane."

"Except for bitin' people."

Scooter lifted a shoulder. "Didn't happen all that much."

"Enough to get him fired."

"Yeah. I think that was Dr. Schlag. I think Dr. Schlag thought

Teeth was gonna blow the whistle on him and Neena. He never suspected Aggie."

"Or you."

"He thought I was too stupid."

"Whereas Teeth . . ."

Scooter smiled very slyly for an alleged low-IQ type. "Whereas Teeth was naturally smarter."

"Yeah. And Teeth thought Dr. Schlag was a . . . fellow traveler."

"Lot of us did—until he met Neena."

"So." I tried to gather my thoughts. "Talk to me about Augusta."

"Whata ya wanna know?"

"Some of the basics. What was her last name?"

He motioned me over to the card table away from the rest of the orderlies. I followed him, and we sat in the shadowy corner of the big general room.

"I don't want to get Aggie into trouble. I liked her."

I nodded. "I'm not lookin' to cause her any trouble."

"This hasn't got nothin' to do with the cops?"

"Nope."

"Or lawyers or nothin'? I mean, I'm sorry to ask, Flap, but in your kinda business—who knows who's got you askin' questions?"

"It's nobody lookin' to cause her any trouble. Really."

He looked at me for a minute, trying to figure how much he could trust me. "I'll tell you stuff you could find out anyway. But I'm not givin' any secrets."

"That's all I want—the basics."

"Like: Her last name was Donne. *D-O-N-N-E.* I think she was English."

"She had an accent?"

"A little."

"She ever work with Looney Lenny?"

"She was his favorite. He wouldn't even come in here if she wasn't here."

"I hear they were more than close. I hear they had a love nest in the X-ray room."

He shifted in his seat. "Oh. You heard about that."

"From what's-her-name at the desk."

"Donna."

"Donna."

"Yeah, she might have been the one who got Aggie fired. She didn't like Aggie's . . . approach."

"The sex thing."

"I guess."

"Maybe this Augusta could explain it better. Where can I call her?"

He looked at me. "I don't believe, Flap, that I'd tell you even if I knew—but I honest to God don't know where she is. I haven't seen her."

"And nobody knows where she is."

"She got a raw deal here. She wouldn't keep in touch."

"And you think what's-her-name-front-desk got her fired."

"Donna. I believe she did, yes."

I stood up. "They had to send her last check somewhere."

"Personnel files are confidential, Flap."

"Uh-huh."

"You couldn't see 'em."

"But you could."

"If I felt like it."

I drummed on the desk for a second, looking around the room, then I looked back at him. "It's for Lenny. He misses her."

"You're lookin' for Aggie because *Lenny* wants to see her?"

"Believe it or not—and I'd prefer to keep that between you and me, could you?"

"Yeah, if it's really for Lenny. What's the deal? You owe somebody a favor?"

"Dally over at the Easy."

He nodded wisely. "Oh, yeah—she's one to take care of the strays."

"She's always done right by me."

"So she wants you to help Looney Lenny."

"Yup."

"What for?"

"She's got a mother-hormone thing."

"Really."

I nodded. "A go-go."

"Well, if it's really for Ms. Oglethorpe . . ."

"And Lenny . . ."

"If it really is for them . . ."

"Scooter—you're a doubting Thomas."

"In this world? That's standard—don't you think?"

"I guess so." I tapped the table. "So you'll get me the phone number or the address or something?"

"If I can."

"Can you do it now?"

He squinted. "Now?"

"Lenny's lonely."

"Yeah, well, who's not?" But he got up all the same and put his finger to his lips.

I nodded and made myself busy elsewhere in the big room while he moved very casually into the hall. In five he was back.

He motioned me over to the doorway. "Donna's gotta go on break. You wanna come keep me company while I spot her a couple minutes to herself?"

I shrugged like somebody was watching us. "Okay."

We headed out the door and back to the front desk. I waved at Donna. She stood up and poked Scooter affectionately in the arm. "Thanks, big boy. I'll be back right away. Nothing's going on. You gettin' what you need, Flap?"

I looked down. "Just about."

She hoisted up her purse. "Five minutes, Scooter."

He nodded, sat at her desk. I leaned on the counter. She went off down the hall.

I looked down at the countertop. "Nice work, Scooter."

He kept his eyes focused on the desk in front of him. "Help yourself."

I took a look down the hall: It was empty. I popped over to the file cabinets, zoomed in on PERSONNEL, zipped it open, and checked the *D*'s. There it was: AUGUSTA DONNE. No phone, but an address on St. Dominic, one of the grand old streets just off Ponce close to the Majestic. It's a big old rich-people-house, old-family-money street. Nice address too: 1 St. Dominic. I slid the drawer in silently, sauntered back around the counter.

He leaned forward a little in his chair. "So, Flap . . . whata ya hear from Neena?"

"She's a lesbian dental hygienist in New Mexico."

"A hygienist for lesbians?"

"Got a girlfriend."

"Ah." He had to smile. "That Neena."

"Uh-huh. Look, Scooter . . . thanks."

"I didn't do a thing."

"Okay. I got some work to do—you want me to keep you up on the situation?"

"Nope. I always find it's better not to know these things."

I pointed at him. "It's your world."

He nodded sagely. "I just let everybody else play in it."

I shoved myself off from the counter and headed out to the parking lot. It was really dark, and colder than it should have been. I couldn't decide if I wanted to go to the address or to the Easy for a glass or to the Golden Potala for a little repast before I continued my labors. I was really just trying to put off going home and thinking about the events of the day: the dead girls, the ankle bracelets, the sad little apartment, the terrified topless dancers, the smell of decay in the *art*-movie parking lot, the all-knowing bouncer, and the psychological techniques of the man who ran off with my ex—not to mention the trouble in our little corner of Tibet. I sat in the car for a minute, tried to let it warm up, making up my mind. Curiosity got the better of me. What if I just drove over to St. Dominic and there she was? Mystery solved. I shoved it into gear and backed out into the night.

# 10

## *One St. Dominic*

So you go right out of the parking lot, past the fine old Callanwolde house—a little castle of a family home that's now a center for the arts—and a few blocks later you can turn down the streets of the saints.

But it's not the first stringers. No St. Peter or St. John. It's all St. Charles or St. Imogene—a short jog on which will lead you to St. Dominic. The address 1 St. Dominic is not, as you might imagine, the first one on the block—it's right smack in the middle and up on a little rise. Looming in the moonlight, it looks a lot like a sinister fortress, turrets and all.

I parked on the street. The moon was up, but the clouds were so thick that there was only a dull imitation of light. Still, I found my way up the drive to the door. It had a big lion's head with a ring in its mouth you could use to knock. I rang the bell.

And there he was: the last guy in the world I would have expected at the door.

"Hey, Flap. You find her?"

"Hey, Lenny. What are you doing here?"

" 'S my house, genius—where else would I be at this time of night? Gee, Flap, for a brain you sure are slow sometimes."

"This is your house."

"You wanna come in?"

"Absolutely."

He stepped back. The hallway opened up to a waterfall of a staircase directly opposite the entrance, with a huge den flanking the right side. In the den there was a fireplace large enough to roast Citizen Kane on a spit—and a cheery roaring blaze.

"Some digs, Lenny."

He danced into the den ahead of me, dressed in a snappy bathrobe and very expensive-looking slippers. "It's comfortable."

The room was filled with antiques and dark wood and books—and you just knew someplace in the room there was twenty-year-old port.

Lenny plunked down in a throne of a Queen Anne chair and waved at me to take up residence in the twin beside it. "Sit by the fire. It's great!"

I sat. "Lenny, this is like out of a *movie* this room."

He grinned from ear to ear. "I know."

"How long you live here?"

He had to think. "Three years? Since I came to Atlanta. My dad used to live here—still does sometimes. He's got houses all over."

"You came here from . . ."

"Boston. It's cold."

"I know. You move here account of the weather?"

"Well, sorta."

"Sorta?"

"I had a fight with Dad."

"Really."

"Uh-huh."

"About . . ."

"About a week before I moved here."

"No, Lenny . . . what was the *fight* about?"

"Money."

"You wanted a bigger allowance?"

"No. I wanted to give a lot of money away."

"You did?"

"Yup. Like to the less fortunate and stuff."

"Like who? Who's less fortunate?"

"Than me? Gee, Flap—look around. Almost everybody's less fortunate than me."

So I humored him and looked around the room. I thought about the guys he was hanging with on the streets, and how this room would have been paradise to that crowd—to any crowd. I thought about my crummy little apartment, and the two girls in their empty room at the

Alhambra, and the seedy backstage at the Tip Top. Then I looked over at Lenny in his big old chair and smiled. Here's a guy who barely has two good thoughts to rub together to keep his brain sparking, who's an outpatient at a mental hospital, who made up a wife just because he's lonely and she's beautiful—and he's got it figured that most everybody in the world is less fortunate than he is. You had to love him.

"I see your point, Len. By the way, did you know there's a Cascade Road here in Atlanta? South side. Where I grew up, in fact."

He nodded. "Yeah. There's a Cascade Road in lots of your big cities . . . where Dad's been. So why ya here, Flap?"

So Cascade Road's in a lot of big cities. Don't know why, but it creeped me. "Just wanted to tell you what I found out about your wife so far, is all."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Not exactly."

"That's really all that matters to me."

It was like he was afraid to hear the facts because they might upset the delicate construction of his fantasy.

"Just wanted you to know I was on the ball, Len."

"I know you can do this, Flap. I really miss her. I really want her back."

"You know Donna over at the hospital, the front desk?"

"Uh-huh."

"You know she got Augusta fired."

"Yeah."

"How come?"

"Everybody was jealous of Augusta. She was smarter and prettier and neater than any twelve other people put together. They all thought she was stuck up, but she wasn't. She was nice."

I started to press just how nice she was in the X-ray room, but it suddenly seemed like . . . very bad manners. In a room like that, manners counted.

"Lenny, just like you said last night at Easy, her last known address was here. That's why I came. I thought she might be here."

He gave me such a laugh. "Hellfire, Flap. Why in the *world* would I want you to find her if she was already home? And people call *me* a retard."

"Glad I could hand you a chuckle. Mind if I look around?"

"Sure. It's a great house. Look everywhere." He popped up out of his chair. "Check out this cool stairway." And he dashed off into the hall.

I followed. The stairway was unbelievable. It must have been ten feet wide, all oak. The banister ended in carved wooden lions, one on either side of the steps, and disappeared above, curving away and to our left. Lining the walls as you'd ascend there were Dutch Masters-looking paintings, stern and warm at the same time.

Lenny flopped on the floor like a kid. "Lookit the lions." And he growled at one of them.

"Neat. Could I see some of Augusta's stuff?"

"Sure." He bobbed back up and shot up the stairs.

At the top there was a long, dark hall. He was nowhere to be seen by the time I got there, so I peeked in every room. They were guest rooms mostly, set up like somebody was just about to visit: fresh flowers, turned-down beds. But I figured they always looked that way.

After a minute I heard him in a room at the end of the hall. When I got there he was going through a closet.

"That's her clothes?"

"Gee, Flap, what took ya?"

"I was fascinated by the decor and whatnot."

He ignored me. "Yeah."

I came over to him. "So, these her clothes, Len?"

"Uh-huh, but I was going through pockets to see if there was, like, a clue."

"A clue."

"Yeah, I didn't even think about it before. Don't you guys look for clues and stuff?"

"Us guys?"

"Detectives."

"You're thinking about the movies, Lenny. I'm not exactly a detective—not like that. I just have a knack for finding things."

"Uh-huh."

"I see the pattern. I see what's missing from the pattern. I fix the pattern. That's all."

"Oh."

"Like the Eskimos."

"Uh . . . like the what?"

"I heard about it when I was in the service. Army mythology. These army guys in World War II or something had to abandon a bunch of bulldozers and trucks in Alaska or somewhere because they were broken down and nobody could fix 'em. So about a year later,

spring, they came back to haul 'em away, and they were gone. Know where they were?"

"The Eskimos had 'em?"

"Yup. And you know how they fixed 'em?"

"Uh . . ."

"They saw what was wrong with the pattern and made it whole again. They didn't know anything about engines or mechanics or anything, but they could see what was wrong with the whole thing. That's the Eskimo perspective of life."

"Neat-o!"

"Yeah. And you know how they turned the bolts and stuff?"

"How?"

"With their teeth. Eskimos have very strong teeth."

"Now you're just making this up to tease me."

"Swear to God, Len. You gotta have strong teeth to eat whale blubber."

"I was believing you up to the teeth part."

"Look it up."

He rolled his eyes. "Where? Eskimo Encyclopedia?"

"I'm tellin' ya, these guys in the service, they believe it."

"You gotta go to college to make up a story like that?"

"Never mind, Lenny. Just let me look through her stuff for a minute, okay?"

"For clues."

I blinked. "Right."

He was happy. He sat on the floor while I looked through her closet and her dresser and the books on her nightstand. She was reading a book about winning chess moves. Very dry. There really wasn't much to go on. It looked like her room had been cleaned three or four times since she'd disappeared—it smelled extremely fresh, a little outdoorsy, very familiar . . . but I couldn't quite place the scent. In fact, except for the different scent, this room was pretty much like all the other guest rooms.

"Hey, Lenny? You guys sleep in separate rooms?"

He was busy playing with some little paper airplane he was making. "Uh-huh. That's how married people do it."

"Really."

"Yeah. My dad and mom sleep in different wings at our house in Boston."

"How come?"

" 'S more romantic."

"What?"

"You know, you don't gotta hear a person snore or brush their teeth or tinkle or anything. You just get the pretty picture."

"I guess that is more romantic."

"You bet."

"So how long has she been missing again?"

"Awhile. I tried to tell Dalliance about it when it first happened, but I think she didn't believe me at first."

"Maybe it was the Uma Thurman thing."

He giggled. "Yeah. That was a good one."

"But Dally didn't believe anything for a while."

"Uh-huh. So I just figured she'd come home after a while. Maybe she was on vacation or something, you know? My mom goes to the Hamptons a lot without my dad. That's another thing married people do: separate vacations."

"Where do you vacation?"

"Me? I don't need a vacation."

"How come?"

He stopped his fussing with his paper airplane, looked far off, and tried to explain to me, as best he could, something about the metaphysics of his world. "For me . . . Flap . . . life is a vacation."

And then he went right back to playing.

"I see." And I did. He was happy all the time. Why does a guy like that need a vacation?

"So, you find anything, Flap?" He zoomed his plane around.

"Nuh-uh. Looks like the room's been cleaned a couple of times since she left."

"I got a maid."

"I'd imagine."

He all of a sudden got tired of his toy and stood up. "You wanna cuppa coffee or something?"

"Yeah. That'd be swell."

"I think there's some all ready for us in the kitchen." And he bounced out of the room, jamming his little paper plane in the pocket of his robe.

I followed closer behind this time, down the stairs. He slipped off toward the kitchen; I wandered back to the den. Call me a cynic. If I was an ambitious redhead and got some looney little rich guy to fall for me in the X-ray room, and then I saw his house and found out about his family connections—wouldn't I be willing to fake a mar-

riage with the guy? Especially if I could sleep in my own room. Would I care if I got fired? And once I'd plucked the sucker for all the loot I could get, wouldn't I take a powder? And wouldn't the poor sap spend at least a portion of the rest of his days looking for me?

Over by the fireplace there was a writing table. I was attracted to it because it had a quill pen and inkwell. Above it on the wall was a famous-looking portrait of Washington. I went over to check it out, and I couldn't help noticing there was a kind of diary-looking thing just sitting there—open. Like somebody'd just been writing in it. The ink was even a little wet, I thought.

I took a quick check of the doors, heard Lenny way off in the kitchen clinking dishes, and zipped back over to check out the diary. It was very clean, calm handwriting. There were years of entries, judging by the dates. I flipped backward until I caught a glimpse of a strange drawing. It was a kind of yin-yang sign, but made from the intimate posturing of a man and a woman. It was very good—not a doodle.

Underneath the drawing it said:

> *This is the perfect union. Here is the perfect woman: Her hair is red, her eyes are bright, she is a healer. She will work and work to help the one she loves. Others will scorn her, but she is precious to me. Her love will make me whole. She will love no other. She is everything perfect. She is the essence of the feminine. She is yin to my yang. She is the perfect woman. We will talk about everything. I invent my exact match and there she is. She becomes my wife, and life is whole; the world is healed, the seasons cease their endless turning, and time itself stands still.*

It was dated five months ago. It said "Yin to my yang" just like Lenny did in the Easy when he described Augusta. It was creepy, for some reason, when it should have been beautiful. And it didn't sound quite like the Lenny I knew. Not quite. Maybe the germ of the guy he could have been if his brainpan hadn't been leaky. Had he actually written it?

And what was I supposed to make of it? I was nearly back to thinking he'd invented the whole thing, except for the fact there was a photo of her that other real live people recognized.

I heard the dishes coming closer, and I slipped over by the fire to warm my hands. Lenny came in with a tray.

"Coffee!"

I nodded. "So, Len—you really were married to Augusta Donne."

He set the tray down on the table between the two Queen Anne chairs without even looking at me. "Is that her . . . whata ya call it . . . maiden name?"

"Yeah, and you didn't tell me she was from England."

He turned around then, all smiles. "Is that why she talked that way? That was pretty cool."

"You didn't know?"

He paused, once again trying to seem like a knowledgeable lecturer. "Flap"—he tapped the tips of his fingers together in front of his face—"when you're talking to Augusta, the last thing in the world you're thinking about is where's she from. You're knocked out by her face, the smell of her hair, the sound of her voice." He sighed. "So, whata ya want in your coffee?"

I stared back at him for a second. Something in his voice . . . maybe the little guy *had* written that diary entry.

"Flap? Whata ya want in your coffee?"

"Sugar, no cream."

He turned back around. "This coffee's from Seattle. It's Gold Coast Blend, my fave."

"You get your coffee shipped in from Seattle?"

"Uh, yeah." He handed me the cup. Then, like he was tired of explaining: "It's my *fave.*"

I sat in the chair and decided on another course of action. "So your dad's pretty rich."

He plunked down beside me in his chair and slurped his cup. "I guess."

"He pay for your drugs and stuff at the GIMH?"

"I guess."

"You got a file down there?"

"Everybody's got a file down there, Flap. Even you."

"I do?"

"Account of Neena."

"I see."

"I saw it once. Augusta showed me."

"Augusta showed you *my* file at the GIMH?"

He slurped again. "Uh-huh."

"Why would she do a thing like that?"

"I asked her to. You're a kind of hero type of person to some people. I wanted to know more about you." Smile like a six-year-old.

I thought about how he'd confused his marriage ceremony with mine, took another slow sip of the swell java. "What'd it say, my file?"

Lenny smiled bigger at me. "Said you were a pretty snappy dresser for a layabout."

I grinned back at him. "Did not."

"Did so."

"Not—infinity."

"Okay, it said you were a private investigator and a part owner of the Easy."

"What?"

"That's what it said. Not much, really. It was just that anybody married to a patient, they gotta have somethin' in the files. That's what Augusta told me anyways."

I thought about it. "So they have something about you and Augusta being married?"

He shook his head. "We were married in secret. She was afraid of getting fired. Which she got anyway. Plus, they were all hot about patients mixing with employees because of Dr. Schlag and Neena. It was a big scandal, I guess."

"I know."

He yawned. I could tell he was past his bedtime. "Yeah, I know you know, I'm just saying—"

"So there's no file at GIMH that says you're married?"

"Not that I know of."

"You got a wedding license?"

"Somewhere."

"The deal is . . . if I had concrete proof of the marriage it would . . . help the investigation."

He set his cup down. "Oh, I get it. Some guys gotta see the papers on everything. It's like: Did you know they won't even let you drive around here without taking a *test*?"

I settled back. "What's the world coming to?"

"Exactly."

"So you got proof?"

"Somewhere."

"Could we get it?"

"I'll have to look in the morning." He yawned again. "Who you gonna show it to?"

I leaned in. "Lenny, I'm gonna tell you something."

"Okay." He shifted in his chair, sitting on his legs like I was going to tell him a story. "But make it short. Coffee makes me sleepy."

"Keeps most people awake, Len."

"Did you notice yet, Flap? I'm not like most people."

I thought about the kinds of medication he was probably taking at the hospital and figured caffeine had a different effect on him than on me. And this was some pretty strong coffee. I was on the edge of my seat.

"Okay, Lenny, the thing is: What if Augusta was just trying to get your money?"

He laid his head against the side of the chair. "She could have it."

"I'm saying, bud, what if that's all she was interested in?"

"I'm saying, Flap, she could have it."

"Lenny . . ."

He was real soft. "I don't care why she was here, Flap. I just liked it and I want her to be here again. Whatever." He closed his eyes.

I set my cup down. "Okay, pal. I'll just keep seeing what I can do." I stood up. "You wanna go upstairs?"

He licked his lips. "I'm okay here. You leavin'?"

"I'll find my way out."

" 'Kay."

" 'Night, Lenny Cascade."

In a whisper, like he was already asleep: " 'Night, Flap Tucker."

# 11

## *Tea*

I had to get to Dally. I had a pretty pressing question for her. But the lure of hot tea and soup, plus the "St. Flap" feeling I thought I might get for helping out the Golden Potala family—it was just too alluring. So I headed on over to see Linda and her kin.

Now, there is a soup that is called asparagus soup, and for my money it's the only soup to have when you've got to ask or answer any questions—which is pretty much anytime in my book. It's made with a chicken broth, and it doesn't exactly include the best parts of the asparagus, in that there are no sissy tips involved, just good hard stalks that have been boiling all day in chicken broth and secret spices. You slam that down with a pot of hot tea, and it doesn't matter what time of year it is outside—inside your coat it's summer.

I swatted the door out of my way and took a table by the wall. Linda smiled from the register. The joint was all but empty.

"Hey, Flap. Soup?"

"You read my mind."

She disappeared. In no time flat her father chugged out of the kitchen on an interception course.

Before he even sat down he started. "You back to help."

I nodded.

"Dally say it's okay?"

"Didn't ask yet. It's only one of a number of questions I gotta ask our girl."

He didn't know what I was talking about. Okay by me. He just sat and waited for me to ask him the right question.

I obliged. "So tell me the story of your brother and the monster man."

He looked around his little place. "All this, it comes from my home—my home in Tibet."

"I know. It's beautiful."

He looked at the floor. "Doesn't matter if it's a stone from the ground; it's from *home*. You got no idea what it's like to be in such a strange country. You got no idea what it's like to know you can never go home. The home I have is gone. The Chinese burn it up like a straw dog."

"Straw dog?"

"Sacrifice in Shinto. It's a little dog made out of straw to sacrifice for good luck. Used to use real dogs."

"Nice."

He shrugged. "The god you got in this country, they nail him up on a big stick. I seen it in churches. Terrible image." He actually shivered.

"If it makes any difference to you, the guy you're talking about got better. In fact, he came back from the dead and rose up into heaven."

"Why don't they show that? Much better picture."

I shrugged. "Are we getting off the point?"

He nodded. "My family in Tibet, they send me what they can to preserve our religion. But the Chinese, they take it. They steal it or burn it up or rub it in the ground. It's not good."

"Agreed."

He lowered his voice and leaned into me. "They even got into the Lamasaries, into the holy vaults at Lasa."

I was hip. "Where the Dalai Lama used to live."

He nodded hard. "Yes. Even there. They steal everything."

"But your family over there, they try to send some of it to you?"

He got me in eye lock. "Some work in the temples, some are monks or nuns. My country, a very religious country. Not like America. We can't do bad things in my religion. We have religion every day." He was very insistent on this particular point.

"Okay."

"So my brother here in Atlanta, he is the one they send to because he is invisible."

I blinked. "Invisible."

"No passport, no social security, no record of any kind. I own a business. I got papers. He cannot be traced."

I wanted to ask how *that* had come about, but Linda brought the soup and the tea, and suddenly soup seemed more important. It was so hot I had to hold the spoon halfway to my mouth for a good while, just waiting for the first taste.

He looked down again. "I live in Atlanta over twenty years, it's still not home. Everyone is a stranger here. Nothing is familiar. I will die here, far away from my home."

Linda saved me. "Nice dinner conversation, Pop."

He looked up. He actually smiled at me. "Taste your soup."

I did. It was swell.

Linda nudged him. "Just tell the man your problem."

He nodded. "My brother, he's got trouble now."

Linda couldn't wait for the old guy to get on with it. "Uncle Tegu, he's got hooked up with a guy who's pumping some money into him or scaring him bad or something—"

The father interrupted. "He has pictures."

Linda nodded. "Right. Uncle said he saw some kind of a videotape that scared the peanuts out of him."

I raised my eyebrows. "Videotape?"

She shrugged. "Don't know about it . . . but he's scared. And he's pushing the family for more of these sacred artifacts. Very dangerous. And then this man takes them and sells them, we think."

Her father was suddenly strong. "We don't want to sell."

Linda went on. "But this guy that Uncle's got mixed up with is a real nut case. He snarls like an animal. He told Uncle he's from . . . what'd he say, Pop?"

"He's from the shadow place. He threatens my brother's invisibility."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. And apparently he's something of a schizo. One day funny, one day mean—you never know how he's gonna be. Uncle's terrified of the guy and wants out. But the guy won't budge."

The old man tapped the table with his hand. "That's where you come in. You get this man away from us."

I blew on another spoonful of soup and took a sip. "How'm I supposed to do that?"

Linda's father was very agitated now. "You the tough guy. You chase him off."

I set my spoon down. "Tough guy?"

Linda explained it to me slow. "Any American in a suit is a tough guy to my family. We aren't that big on muscle in my native land."

"So your dad was telling me. You got a thing called religion over there."

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

I gave up the spoon; the asparagus was gone. I picked up the bowl and drank. Set the bowl down. "Great soup."

He patted the table harder. "You help my brother."

Linda was calmer, but I could see this was a big deal to both of them. "All they really want you to do is go to the next meeting they're supposed to have with the guy and see can you scare him off. Could be if he thinks there's a . . . non-Asian involved, that'll automatically give him pause."

I raised my eyebrows. "Or he'll give me a pop in the nose."

She smiled. "Like it'd be the first time."

"What's this guy look like?"

The old guy squinted. "Fat little man, flashy dresser, big blond hair, talks mean."

I looked at Linda. "Flashy dresser?"

She almost laughed. "Like, sans-a-belt golf slacks, loud ties—that sort."

"Ah." I shoved the bowl away from me and finished off my tea. "What kinda tea is this? It's different from what I usually get."

Linda looked at her father, then back at me. "It's a black tea. Also got ginseng in it. It's a kind of herbal tea, I guess."

Her father smiled at her. "It can feed the heart; it give you courage." He smiled at me. "You can help my family."

I nodded. "I can. I gotta talk to Dally, but tell me when's the next meeting with this nut boy."

He shook his head. "Don't know."

I looked at Linda. "Call me. You got the number?"

She patted my shoulder. "On the wall, right by the emergency hospital number."

I stood. "Good. We may need that number too."

Linda and her father both shook my hand, and I guess it made some sort of pact. I waved at them going out the door, they waved back. But something was sticking in my mind. Something was adding to the confusion. Something made me think I might not have two cases after all.

# 12

## *Easy Listening*

The club was fairly quiet by the time I got there. The sign said NO BAND TONIGHT. I shoved myself onto a stool at the bar, and Hal slung me some vino.

" 'Bout out, Flap."

"I think I got four or five more bottles."

"Here?"

"At home. Safe. Hidden."

He made a face. "This stuff really taste all that much better?"

"Than American wine? Are you kidding? If it's not red and French, it's just a beverage made with grapes. It ought not even be called *wine* legally."

He turned away. "And people say the Frogs got attitude about it."

"Yeah, well . . ."

But Dally appeared and the connoisseurs' convention came to a close.

I nodded, saluted her with my glass. "Ms. Oglethorpe."

She sat beside me. "Mr. Tucker."

"Quiet night."

She squinted and looked around. "Too quiet."

"Think they might be gettin' ready to attack?"

"We'll know when the drums stop."

I smiled. "No band tonight?"

"Kelly's recording tonight. I didn't feel like listening to anybody else."

"She is easy on the ear."

"Not to mention: a looker."

"I *told* you not to mention that." I took a sip. "Guess what I found out?"

"Oswald acted alone?"

"Almost as unbelievable: I own part of this club."

She raised her eyebrows. "Who told you a thing like that?"

"Lenny saw it in my file at the GIMH."

"*Your* file?"

"Yeah, how 'bout that? And guess what else I found out?"

"Maybe you better come into the office."

I stood up. "At least."

We stepped our way through the mostly empty tables, past the rest rooms, and into Dally's messy little office.

I took a seat on the beat-up old sofa by the door and she sat next to me like a dancer: perfect posture, edge of the seat. She was only doing it to irritate me.

With her hands folded, not looking at me, she sighed indulgently. "Okay. What have you found out?"

"Before I say, can you tell me what's the deal? Do I own part of this dump?"

"Your name's on a lot of the papers."

"How come?"

"Because I'm currently leaving everything to you in my will—including the club."

"Your *will*?"

"Everybody's gotta die sometime."

"Maybe, but don't you think I'm gonna go long before you?"

"Probably."

"So leave it to . . . somebody else."

"Like?"

I took another sip and shrugged.

She nodded. "That's what I thought too."

I looked at her profile in the dim light. "So . . . how come you an' me aren't married, tell me again?"

" 'Cause you don't have enough sense to ask me, and I got too much sense to say yes."

"Oh." I nodded, wisely. "Right. Now I remember." I sipped. "Thanks for thinking of me in your will though."

"Don't mention it. So whata ya know?"

"In order?" I set my glass down on the table in front of us and sat up, numbering off the news on my fingers. "Teeth's a great guy that the cops'll arrest—incorrectly. The girls were in the trunk maybe as much as a couple of weeks before they were found—*and* they were lovers. Perennials are your best bet for color all season long. Lenny's wife is real, although not, maybe, his wife exactly. A medical staff can be worse than a daytime soap opera. Lenny lives less than five blocks away in a house big enough for fifty. And most of the known world seems to be engaged, in one way or another, in some sort of tantric sex."

Droll as a troll, she lowered her lids half-mast. "So where's Augusta?"

"I'm saying she skipped the country. She found out Lenny was rich, fleeced him within an inch of his life, and split."

"She took him for a lot?"

"Lenny would have given her anything. And still would."

"So . . . this kind of looks to be a sad story, as it turns out."

"So far, yeah."

She was quiet a minute. "So, you do your . . . thing yet?"

I picked up my glass and settled back in. "Nope."

She was referring to my trick. My one trick. I'd been avoiding it all day, but sooner or later I'd have to go home and do it. I can't describe it in words, exactly—something like pouring out a bucket and then setting it out in the rain to be filled up again. I empty my head, and something else fills it up. If I *think* about it, the thing vanishes and I have to start all over. If I talk about it, I think about it too much. How can I say I become the lathe of heaven—without sounding like my file at GIMH ought to be lots bigger? I sit. And if I'm quiet enough and still enough and empty enough, the angel comes and kisses me, and I know where to find the thing that's lost. Once was lost but now it's found. Grace . . . of a sort. That's the way I do it. And I'm always right. Started when I was a kid and Dally lost a ring her dead mother gave her. She wouldn't stop crying, and I was out of my mind to help her. I burned myself up hour after hour, night after night, trying to picture where it was. Then, about a week into it, I got stung by a bee and it distracted me for a second. All of a sudden there it was: I pictured the ring under the back left floor mat of their old Chevy. But there was

more: I saw the big picture, like a jigsaw puzzle. All the pieces—Dally's vacant finger, the days preceding the loss, the moment she realized it was gone, the frantic searches—all flew up in the air and I saw the whole pattern in a single shot. And the piece with the place where the missing ring lay was all in red, a cinch to see. It all just fell into place. Easy as pie.

"So who killed the girls? Who got Ruby? What's the connection? Where's Augusta? How come the cops are coming after Teeth? Does Old Mr. Cascade up in Boston figure in? You got a lot more work to do, you know."

I smiled at her because she was shaking her left index finger at me. That's the finger where she still wears her mother's ring.

I sighed. "I gotta go home." I tossed back the last of the glass.

She stood up. "Flap—this one's stranger than most."

"Yup."

"I'm kinda sorry I called you in on it. I don't want anything weird to happen."

"Too late. I'm into it."

"But I got a bad feeling."

I avoided her eyes. "And Southern women have a *very* high ESP quotient."

"Shut up."

"Uh-huh."

She sighed. "I really am a little worried, okay?"

"Okay." I hoisted myself up and took her elbow. "It'll all be fine. Let me go home and do the thing and I'll give you a call in the morning. Right?"

She looked at me. "Flap . . ." But she didn't finish.

In an effort to smash the uncharacteristic awkward moment between us, I let her in on my new little number. "You know the folks over at the Golden Potala?"

"Sure."

"They want me to help 'em with a little problem."

"Such as?"

"They're getting hassled by some nut. Probably just a one-shot deal. I go to a meeting, I toss a scare into the nut, I click my heels, and I'm back in Kansas."

And instead of asking a lot of questions or telling me what to do—her usual modus operandi—she slumped in her seat.

"Oh."

I couldn't believe it. *"Oh?* That's all?"

She was almost wavering into some kind of angst. Very unusual indeed. "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

What could I do? I gave her a little punch in the arm. "So you said, but I got a very *good* feeling about you, so it all balances out."

She shook her head, but I think she smiled a little.

On my way out Hal waved at me. "Don't forget to bring me some more stuff, Flap. Can't have you floppin' around in that inferior American crap."

"Uh-huh."

"Plus—I like havin' you around, you know."

"Really."

"Gives the place a sorta seedy kind of atmosphere—the kids seem to like it."

I offered him a gesture straight out of Bukowski. "Happy to be of service."

He grinned. "Why does Dally even bother with you?"

"Women like me." I coughed. "I'm clean."

My apartment's not far from the club. Five blocks down Ponce toward Peachtree and you got my street, Durant. Six or seven months out of the year its hooker central, but when the weather turns nice, they migrate to the park a couple of blocks north. The weather this November was rotten, and I could have had all the companionship a boy would want, except that these kids just made me nervous. They all looked desperate and hungry and cold, and they all had the sniffles.

I got a special offer from a concrete angel in the doorway of my building, hiding from the wind. I was very clear with her:

"The only thing I want you to blow is your nose."

She actually giggled, like a ten-year-old. I had a sudden impulse to feed her soup and take her shopping for a better coat. Instead, I went inside.

My place is a lot nicer than I deserve. The building's got only four apartments in it. All lined up from one end to the other you got a glassed-in sun room, a living room, a dining room with a bay window, what they call a galley kitchen, and two bedrooms. I use one for sleeping and the other for an office. I'm a professional. Plus, it's an income-tax break.

Most of my furniture comes from the side of the road or the Salvation Army thrift store. It gives the place a sort of hobo chic. I've got a great stereo, hidden from sight. A few really fine original art pieces are mixed in with the junk—although I've been told it's hard to tell the difference.

I tossed my overcoat on the chair closest to the door, popped on the light in the dining room, and sat at the table. It was a ladder-back chair, and it made me sit up straight. I started my breathing.

You breathe in through your nose and imagine the breath curving upward into your skull and down to your solar plexus. Then you breathe out, continuing downward through the rest of your body, pushing the air with your diaphragm, like away from your privates. It's relaxing.

Then you open your eyes and unfocus, like you do when you're trying to look at one of those 3-D Magic Eye pics in the funnies, and you see the golden curtain. Every so often I try to pull back the golden curtain and see what's on the other side, but each time I do I just end up with a headache. Anyway—you see the golden curtain and you just sit and wait. Most of the time the angel comes to kiss you.

I sat like that, I guess, fifteen minutes before the phone rang. I usually remember to turn it off. The noise brought me right out of the concentration.

"Damn."

I went over and slowly picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Oh . . . hey. I was expecting the machine. Um . . . Flap?"

I was on the verge of recognizing the voice. "Yes?"

"Hi. It's me, Neena."

I guess it would have taken more than a feather to knock me over, I'm a pretty fair-sized guy—but a hurricane could certainly have done the trick. And there she was: Hurricane Dannen.

I blew out a pretty healthy breath of my own. "Yeah, you know . . . in some bizarre way or other I coulda guessed this."

"So you're glad to hear from me."

"No. Not in the least. Not even remotely."

"Don't be that way; I'm calling to commiserate."

"You're not calling from the Shell station, are you?"

"What?"

"It's just that the last time I got a call like this, you were right around the corner."

"Oh. No. I'm in New Mexico."

"That's a break."

"Be nice or I won't console you."

"About . . ."

"Jesus, Flap, the thing in Tibet."

This was often the case with our girl. She never began at the beginning. She was a middle jumper from way back. But you'd have

to admit it was very strong in the too-much-of-a-coincidence department.

"I thought you said you were in New Mexico. And what do I need with all this consolation and commisery?"

"The Panchen Lama, the Red Chinese, the deal in Tibet!"

"Sorry. You're gonna have to be very specific about this one."

"Unbelievable. I thought you, of all people, would be on the edge of your seat about this thing."

"Because . . ."

"What, you're not Mr. Zen thing anymore?"

"I don't know that I ever was Mr. Zen . . . thing."

"You know what I'm saying."

"Not even a little bit."

"There's a new Panchen Lama."

"I'm happy."

"No, you're not."

"I'm not?"

"They got the wrong guy."

I sat down. I knew, as they say, from bitter experience that this thing would have to play itself out. I had little choice but to listen.

"Neena, could you do me a favor and just this once start from the beginning and tell me why you're calling?"

She sighed. Suffering fools gladly was not in her compendium . . . *marrying* them, yes, but being patient with them—nearly out of the question. "Okay, from the beginning"—rife with irony—"First the earth was nothing but a molten ball of ooze. Then plankton appeared—"

"Skip on down."

"Then the godless heathen Red Chinese Commies took over the spiritual center of the universe in Tibet and sent the Dalai Lama—"

"—taking it on the lam out of Tibet and over to Richard Gere's house. I know this part too; skip on down."

She decided to give me a break and turn off the sarcasm. "Okay. About six years ago the old Panchen Lama died. He was the highest-ranking spiritual leader to actually stay in Tibet after the Chinese takeover."

"The Dalai Lama left in, what . . . fifty-nine or something?"

"Right. So you've got the Dalai Lama here in the States trying for Tibetan independence and the spiritual good of humankind, and then you've got the Panchen Lama on the inside, still captive in Tibet, trying for the same thing."

"Only he dies."

"About six years ago. So the Dalai Lama starts doing what he does, casting bones or reading tea leaves . . ."

"Neena . . ."

"Okay, it's a metaphysical probing into the mysteries of the universe or whatever, but he comes up with the successor—for some reason, a six-year-old boy . . ."

"Gotta be six, see, because the belief is that the kid is the old guy reincarnate, in the flesh. And it's not tea leaves and it's not mumbo jumbo; it's very scientific, in its own way."

"Come *on.*"

"No, really. They lay out all the old guy's stuff along with a bunch of other junk and then parade all the kids who are likely candidates in front of this mountain of paraphernalia, and the real guy will pick out all of the dead guy's things. He'll say, like, 'This is my plate. That's my shirt.' Stuff like that."

"Whatever. I mean, any kid who did his homework could memorize a list of things and beat the system."

"Yes, I can see that you would think that, given your penchant for prevarication, but in Tibet—"

"Whatever, but the point is: The Dalai Lama picked the successor last May or something . . . wait."

I heard her rattling newspapers or something.

Then: "Here it is. He picked a little six-year-old guy by the lilting name of . . . Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. Nyima . . . isn't that a John Coltrane song?"

" 'Naima.' Close."

"What's it mean?"

"Somebody's name, is all."

"Well, it's pretty."

"I'm positive you haven't gotten to the point."

"Oh, right. Well, the problem is: The heathen godless Red Chinese have *also* picked a Panchen Lama of their own. *Also* a six-year-old with the equally unpronounceable name of"—more paper rattling—"Gyaincain Norbu. And guess which one is on the throne or in the temple or wherever they keep these guys?"

"The stooge of the Red Chinese."

"Bingo. And the *true* Lama? The one the *Dalai* picked? He's been missing since July."

"What?"

"That's right. Along with his whole family."

"And the Chinese stooge?"

"They just installed him as the . . . here it is: 'Eleventh reincarnation of the Buddha Amatabha—the new official Panchen Lama.' "

I leaned back in my chair. "Wow. Does it say there how the other monks and the Tibetans are taking it?"

"I think the phrase *grim-faced* appeared more than once."

"So the Red Chinese have their own kid on the throne of the highest religious authority in the country. That's it. Tibet is screwed."

"Oh, it's *much* worse than that. I mean, the heathen godless Red Chinese don't give a damn about the religion, right?"

"Right."

"They just want a controlling interest, right?"

"Right."

"I believe they only want to continue to undermine the religious beliefs of the people at the top of the world."

"I agree."

"So there's a trade agreement developing to sell off the great treasures of the Tibetan world for the economic gain of the state."

"What?"

"I don't suppose you'd know that the Lamas have accumulated incredible wealth . . . much greater than the Vatican."

"No, I don't know that. And neither do you."

"I've heard."

"Yeah . . . so this is why you called?"

"Well, plus, you are Mr. Zen thing and I thought you'd want to talk about it." Beat. "And I was thinking about you. Judy and I aren't getting along—"

"I'm busy. I'm working. I got no interest."

She, on the other hand, was suddenly very interested. "Really!" Very hushed: "What's the caper?"

I was equally as whispery: "None of your business."

"Come on, I told you about the end of Tibet. The least you can do is tell me about your case."

"Nope."

"I heard you haven't worked in ages. You have to tell me about it."

"Nope." I marveled at her ability to so adroitly switch from the end of Tibet to gossipy curiosity.

She began to whine. "Jesus, Flap, what's the big secret?" Then she changed her tune. This was much brighter. "Is it about me?"

"Right, Neena. Everything's about you."

"No, I mean, is that why you won't tell me?"

"I won't tell you because it's none of your business."

"Fine. I tell you just about the most important thing in the universe today, and you won't even share your stinky old case with me. I guess you got it from Dalliance." And she said Dally's name in the most pejorative possible way I could have imagined.

"Neena, listen—I appreciate the news from the top of the world and everything, but I was actually trying to concentrate on my business here . . . so—"

"Oh! Were you in the middle of your thing?"

"What?"

"Were you in your little trance-state-picture-puzzle thing?"

"I knew, even at the time I was telling you, that I should never have said anything to you about that."

"And they locked *me* up for a nut."

"You were a nut."

"Was not. I just needed a little time to myself."

"You were a *filbert.*"

"I just needed to be alone."

"With Dr. Schlag."

"Don't start."

"Okay."

"We're still together, you know."

"No, we're not, and I've got the papers to prove it."

"No, I mean me and *Nete.* We're still together."

"Ah. I heard you were battin' for the other team."

"I am—but it's no reason to lose a perfectly good husband . . ."

". . . who doesn't *want* to get lost."

"Are you telling me you wanted to get lost, Flap? Hey, isn't that a Chet Baker song, 'Let's Get Lost'?"

"Yes, it is." I lowered my voice. "Okay. 'Bye, now." And I almost hung up.

"Flap?"

I put the phone back to my ear. "What?"

"Aren't you even glad I called?"

"Nope."

"Not even for the news?"

"You're asking me if I'm *glad* you called to tell me this hideous news?"

"No, I meant, you know . . . aren't you glad to hear from me?"

I sighed very deliberately. "Neena, the melodrama of this poor-little-me-I-just-called-to-say-hello-and-you're-the-meanest-man-on-

the-planet thing means *so* little to me. I *know* you don't mean it. Not even for even a *fraction* of a second."

She waited. I could actually hear her thinking over the phone. Finally, very clear and spry: "Well, you have to admit it usually works."

And that, of all things, made me like her better. "Yeah, it's pretty good when you get it revved up."

"It's broken the back of many a lesser man."

"This I believe."

"It's good to talk to you, Flap."

"In some very bizarre way it's good to talk to you too."

"Good luck on the case, or whatever."

"Thanks. And thanks for the news flash. It actually means something to me, believe it or not."

"Sure. Turn on a TV or pick up a paper once in a while. They might be trying to tell you something."

"G'bye, Neena."

"So, tell me again how come we got divorced."

"Because I had sense enough to ask you and you didn't have sense enough to say no."

"Right. Now I remember. 'Bye, Flap."

She hung up. I sat around for a minute or two in the silence. Silence is good. But I knew there would be no golden curtain or magic trick or sudden solution to the caper at hand, not tonight. All that had been blown to hell by Hurricane Dannen—just when you thought it was safe to answer the phone again. I gave up right away trying to see the big picture and turned on the little tube. I fell asleep watching *Jeopardy!* In retrospect, it seemed appropriate.

# 13

## *Teeth Marks*

When I woke up I went back to Decatur. The afternoon sun was warm and we were back to a more typical kind of weather for a Georgia November. I'd called just to check up on old Teeth—see if I was wrong about the cops and all. Turns out they'd called just before I had. They were on their way for a little visit. He seemed kind of glad to hear from me. I think he was glad I was coming over too.

When I got to his house he was in the front, on his knees, digging around his mailbox with a little spade. I parked on the street and got out of the car.

He didn't even look up. "Never too late for pansies."

I watched him dig. "You gotta plant 'em every year?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why don't you go for perennials?"

"Well . . ." He got to his feet. "Once I plant these pansies they'll bloom from now until the really hot weather starts in late spring next year. Most perennials bloom only a week or two. More work equals more bloom."

"I thought if you did right with the perennials, you could have color all season long."

"You been talking to Tony."

"Okay, maybe I have."

He headed for the house. "He's the one got me into gardening."

"Yeah, I'm thinkin' about it myself."

"But my favorite is spices, and he knows *nothing* when it comes to them."

"Yeah, I know you got mint all over the backyard."

We got to the porch. I waited while he took off his shoes and dropped them on the steps. He sighed. "Mint was Ruby's idea."

"So . . . the police called?"

He opened the door. "On their way."

Inside, he hadn't picked up and things were a little messier than on my previous visit, but it was still impressive with the decor and what-not. Teeth fell onto the sofa.

"Yeees, they couldn't figure it out all by themselves, but mean old mister computer told them that the common element in two unsolved murder cases was none other than yours very truly."

"As we knew it would."

"I tried to convince them that it was pure coincidence, which they don't really seem to believe in as a concept. I mean, Tony's as much of a connection as I am."

"Tony? Tony the Boulder at the Tip Top?"

He smiled. "*Tony the Boulder*—that's cute."

"What's Tony got to do with it?"

"He's the one got me the job at the Tip Top—you know, because of his sister."

"His sister?"

"Aggie. Aggie Donne. She worked at the GIMH when I did. We were pretty tight. I think she got fired on account of me. I mean, she was always defending me, God bless her twisted little self. Anyway, when I got the ax she called up her bro and got me my current position."

"Augusta Donne is Tony the Boulder's sister?"

"I figured you knew that." He shifted and sat up—even smiled. "You know, I thought about you after you left the other day."

"No. I didn't know."

"I was on a different shift than Scooter and all most of the time, but I *thought* we'd met."

"And had we?"

"I finally remembered. You're Neena's ex!"

"Okay, maybe I am."

"And the guy I bit? That got me fired? He was bothering Neena, like grabbing her leg or something, and she bopped him one in the gonads."

"This I believe."

"Which just made him madder, so we had to send in the Calvary."

"Cavalry."

"What'd I say?"

"You said the hill where Christ was crucified—but I'm guessing you *meant* some kind of mounted troops."

"You read me like a book."

"Maybe."

"Men on horseback." And he gave me a little fake shiver.

"Look. Don't joke around like this with the cops. They don't have a sense of humor like I do."

"I've never seen you laugh once in our entire acquaintanceship."

"I'm laughing on the inside."

"Where it counts."

"Precisely. Now, just once more—I'm slow—Augusta Donne is . . ."

". . . none other than the sister of Tony Donne, the big old bouncer at the Tip Top amusement emporium. You are kinda slow."

"That's what everybody thinks. But it's deceptive."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really."

"I have a million questions."

He settled back down on the sofa. "Fire away."

"Let's start, just for hazard sake, with the concept of Augusta Donne being 'her twisted little self,' shall we?"

He squinted. "Why?"

"Humor me, why don't you?"

He shrugged. "Whata ya wanna know?"

"What was her problem?"

"*Ssss.* Prob*lems.* Plural."

"Okay, start from the top."

"Well, you know about her and Lenny by now, I'm guessing."

"Tell me."

"They did the dance of forbidden love in the X-ray room every chance they got."

"The lambada?"

"Right."

"Says who?"

"Moi, to name but a few. I caught 'em at it. It was pretty amusing, really."

"What were they doing, no kidding?"

Teeth spread out on the sofa, very divalike. "W-w-w-well. Aggie

and I had quite a few conversations 'round midnight—working the night shift at a looney bin, you know, prompts a certain kind of rhetoric."

"I'm hip."

"We talked a lot about the kind of stuff Ruby and I were into. She seemed to know all about it, but from a more intellectual place than us. We were very spiritual about it all."

"And Aggie was into it too, only from a different school of thought."

"School of thought indeed. Anyway, *that's* the sort of thing she and Lenny were doing."

"What sort of thing, actuálly?"

"You know: the odd postures, the chanting, the special breathing exercises, in one nostril, out the other, sending out your kundalini or whatever."

"I have images in my head I wish weren't there."

"Try finding them doing 'the intertwined serpents' in an X-ray room sometime—you'll wanna shower for a week. But she thought it would help him. And, actually, it seemed to." He shrugged.

I squinted. "Is that all?"

"All that made Aggie weird? Not by a long shot."

"So do go on."

"She nutty in her brain thingamajig."

"To use a technical psychological term."

"Uh-huh. It was like some god-awful childhood thing, but it gave her, like, a short-term-memory problem. Had a problem with reality, not that uncommon."

"I don't even remotely understand."

"She remembered stuff wrong—or weird."

I shrugged.

Teeth shrugged right back. "I guess you'll have to ask Tony if you want the full treatment about that. But it really bugged her, you know? She was sore about it all the time. Said it kept her out of medical school where she should have been, because she couldn't read right. She was always talking about how much more money she could have made if she'd been a doctor instead of a nurse's assistant."

"Money?"

"The subject came up a lot. And we were always joking around about how some of the patients were loaded and didn't have the sense to know it, and how *we* were completely sane and didn't have the money to spend."

"And how unfair that was."

"Tragic, really." He waved his arm grandly. "You see how fabulous my taste is."

"Any patient in particular?"

He sighed. "Oh, she knew all right, but she wouldn't say. She was very ethical when it came to patient files or anything like that. It was maddening. Next question."

"Getting impatient?"

He looked away. "I'm a little nervous about the police coming to visit, yes."

"You don't wanna skip?"

"What's the point? They'd find me eventually, don't you think?"

"Okay. The next question is about the night you bit the guy and it all came down for you: Set up the scene for me."

"Early evening. Neena was playing chess with this guy, and Lenny was standing right next to her and they were talking up a storm. I didn't hear what they were saying, but it was very animated. Then the guy she was playing chess with got cheesed because Neena was beating him and not even paying any attention to him, you know, talking to Lenny and all. So he began touching her inappropriately . . ."

". . . and she bopped him . . ."

". . . in the nuts, so the guy went off like a rocket. Sacked Lenny; took out Scooter; broke a nurse's leg. I got ahold of the arm he was using to swing at Neena and just took a little nip . . ."

". . . and he calmed right down."

"With the help of a little elephant tranquilizer from Aggie's magic syringe. I think that's how she and Lenny met, actually."

"Which nurse?"

"Which nurse what?"

"Broke her leg. Not Donna?"

"Yeah, I think so—Donna. Yeah."

"And?"

"And the guy sobers up the next day and turns out to be one of the rich brat types we were just talking about. He calls his lawyer. They get the impression I'm gay, and suddenly there's a battery of testing could choke Johns Hopkins—"

"He was thinking, like, AIDS?"

He was very quiet. "See. I knew you weren't as slow as you pretended to be."

"And?"

"And what? I was clean. But does that keep our hero from losing the job?"

"So it wasn't *just* the bite. . . ."

He eyes me with a full intent. "No. It was *not* just the bite. A hundred years ago they would have hunted me down in my crypt at night and driven a wooden stake through my heart."

"Or at the very least they woulda had the garlic toast for lunch."

He rolled his eyes.

I sat back in my chair. "So Aggie feels sorry for you and calls up her brother."

"Yeah. You know, how did you think a guy went from mental-ward orderly to necked-club bouncer? It's not a logical career change."

"Luckily, you had the right connections."

He smiled. "I am moving up in the world, don't you think?"

"You seem to like your work."

"What did you think of the place? I'm assuming you've been there now."

"I found it a little depressing, actually."

"And what nightclub isn't?"

"Dally's place."

"Easy? Okay, I'll give you that."

"It's homey."

"Not likely—but it's not depressing."

There was a sudden harsh pounding on the door.

The voice beyond was very cold. "Open up. Police."

I stood.

Teeth flopped off the sofa and straightened his shirt. "How do I look?"

"Get your shoes on." I smiled calmly. "I'll see who it is."

He went for the loafers. I went for the door.

Before I could get to it, there was more pounding. When I flung it open the guy nearly fell in onto the rug.

He whipped himself up and shot me a look like out of a small-caliber handgun. "Horatio Nathaniel Thomaston?"

"Nope."

He started in the door, but I blocked him and spoke very, very politely. "I'm sorry, Officer, but could I see just a moment of identification, please?"

He squinted at me like I was the worst news he'd heard in a month. But he held up his shield. I stepped away from the door.

He put his billfold back. "You the lawyer?"

I smiled bigger. "Do you have a warrant?"

The guy behind him smiled back, colder than chrome, and flashed the warrant for Teeth's arrest. I didn't have a chance to read the details.

The first guy shoved his hands in his overcoat pockets. "Your *client* ready?"

"Mr. Thomaston is just getting his shoes on, and he's eager to cooperate in clearing up any questions you might have."

"We want to ask *Mr. Thomaston* a few questions in connection with *two* current murder investigations, so if you'll hurry him along . . ."

And on cue, Teeth appeared. Overcoat on, polished loafers, every hair in place. He looked like a million bucks.

The first policeman looked at me. "Will you be joining us?"

"No, sir. I'm just a friend. But I'm certain Mr. Thomaston will be wanting to call his lawyer—strictly as a formality, of course—before he answers any of your questions."

And I saw Teeth nod, getting what I was saying.

The guy with the warrant stepped up to me. "You're not his lawyer?"

I shook my head. "I never said I was."

He got his face as close to mine as he could. I think he actually *had* eaten garlic toast for lunch. "Then why am I talking to you?"

I knew better than to say anything. This guy was one of those cops who'd pop you for a quarter . . . or lay off you for a buck. Every town's got some, I guess.

His cohort got ahold of his arm. "Come on, Tommy."

He shoved up against me. "No—you're not his lawyer, so why am I even talkin' to you, *man*?" He shot a look at the other guy could pop a tick. "Let's take him in too."

Policeman Number One shook his head. "What for? Just get Mr. Thomaston into the car." And then he looked at me. "You'll be leaving now."

I nodded. "Absolutely."

As I walked by Tommy he hissed at me, I swear to God, like a weasel, and whispered, "Faggot."

I turned to him very deferentially. "I'm sorry, sir. Maybe I didn't hear you right."

Policeman Number One interrupted Tommy before he could repeat himself. "Would you *please* get Mr. Thomaston in the car?"

I looked at Number One. "Maybe I'm a little hard of hearing. I was in the service." I jerked around to face Tommy. "When, I'm guess-

ing, you were in grammar school, I was in a place called Teh Peth, and a big old grenade went off close to me and popped one of my eardrums and paralyzed me for two days. I couldn't move, and I was lying in swamp water up to my neck. Part of my scalp was being slowly eaten away by mosquito larvae. I was in so much pain I actually had to take my mind out of my body for a while. I can do that. I put it in an egret that was standing nearby. Every so often the egret would fly up and scout out the surroundings. About the end of the second day it saw some GI's, and I took my mind back out of the egret and into my body and called for help, or I would have died. Ever since then I can make my mind do remarkable things. I can see visions and dream dreams. At the moment I'm seeing you in a very uncomfortable medical procedure removing the top of your pate from the depths of your buttalogical area. And by the way, if you do anything—and I mean *anything*—to make Mr. Thomaston the *least* little bit uncomfortable, you'll hear from so many Boston lawyers you'll think you have expired and gone to Jimmy Hoffa's personal hell. Now, since I don't actually think anything's wrong with my hearing—if you have something to say to me, why don't you try it *again*?"

But Tommy was momentarily at a loss for words. In an effort to save the day, Teeth shoved his way past everyone and out toward the police car. As he stepped out the door he whispered, "My hero."

Number One looked at me very evenly. "Always nice to meet a fellow veteran. Now, really—you'll be leaving."

And I was out the door immediately behind Teeth, quicker than you can say "accessory after the fact."

# 14

## *Brothers and Sisters*

I was on my way to the Tip Top even before I got in my car. The police pulled out of Teeth's driveway, headed toward downtown. I was still a little hot and not thinking completely, but Tony the Boulder was the brother of Augusta Donne. I think in a world where that's the case, I can be allowed a little fuzzy thinking.

All the way over to the other side of town I was thinking: What if Augusta was there at the club; what if she was staying with Tony; what if Tony was the one who killed the girls—and masterminded his sister's play for Lenny's money, and set up Teeth, and killed Ruby?

I have to say the place looked different by the time I got there. It was even shabbier than before—and it had started to drizzle. I got out of the car, one of only five or six in the lot, and walked a little slowly into the club.

There he was at the door. I saw him before he saw me.

"Tony."

He looked up just with his eyes from the book he was reading. "Flap."

"What's up?"

"My I.Q. since I been readin' this thing here." And he held up the book, *A Brief History of Time,* by Stephen Hawking. "You read it?"

I shook my head. "I'm waiting for the long version."

"You bein' back so soon bodes ill, I fear."

"The cops got Teeth."

"As we suspected they might."

"Yeah, but not before he told me some news. I'd like to discuss a little something."

He set his book down and settled in his chair, locking eyes with me.

But I shook my head. "Not here in the doorway. Got a little more privacy? It concerns a loved one."

"Yours or mine?"

"Yours and Lenny's."

He stayed frozen with me for a second, and I got my footing under me in case I needed to jump backward and run to my car. I was in no kind of shape to tangle with a guy like Tony—ever. Not even in the younger days.

Finally he leaned forward to stand up. "Ah."

He whirled around and headed into the dungeon of shame. I followed, slowly.

The place was dead. One of the girls was going through the motions for two high-school-looking boys at the edge of the runway, a couple of other guys here and there, and some fat old blond guy in the back. The music was ear-splitting. I followed Tony behind the bar into an office the size of a closet. He closed the door and the music was remarkably muffled.

He sat and pressed his fingers together like a priest. "So, Teeth has now led you to the conclusion that I may be the true connection between the events you are investigating."

"Do you actually know *everything,* or is there a limit to your clairvoyance?"

"I actually know everything."

"Who's the new Panchen Lama?"

"The new who?"

"In Tibet."

"Ya got me."

"Ah."

"Okay, so I know everything about *some* things, and nothin' about others."

"An all-or-nothing guy."

"That's me."

"So I'm looking for the *all* about your sister Augusta."

There it was. No bones. Cards on the table. Either he was going to

tell me or he was going to shoot me. Whichever way it went, my troubles were made easier.

He sat back in the chair. "You gotta believe me, Flap, I had no idea you'd be interested in Aggie. She's got nothing to do with the missing girls or Ruby, honest."

"Tony, I got a story for you, if you wanna listen—but it's not that good for you or your sister at the moment."

"I always like a story in which I have a personal stake."

"I'm looking for Augusta Donne. That's my real case. The girls here, and Ruby and all, that's just a strange, potential connection, maybe. I was hired by Lenny Cascade."

He looked down. "Oh."

"So you see that your sister has everything to do with the reason I'm here. And you see that you yourself are as much of a connection between all these events as Teeth. And you see that currently you're number one on my list if anybody should ask who I think —as they say in the genre—*done it,* because you're protecting your sister or you're in cahoots with her or something."

He didn't look up. He nodded slowly. I sometimes don't know how I get myself into these situations. I sometimes wish I were less forthright. But I wanted to show this guy the true meaning of "all or nothing." I knew if he wanted to he could snap me like a chopstick between his thumb and fingers. If he was willing to stuff naked girls in a trunk and bop a drag queen in his own backyard, he'd think nothing of popping me. But that's the way you have to live life: Here I am, shake my hand or kiss my butt, love me or leave me, give me a medal or strike me dead.

But all he did was sigh. "*Cahoots.* I love that word." He nodded again. "I could see how you'd think that."

"But I'm wrong."

"Yeah. But I can see why you'd need more to go on. Um—what all did Lenny tell you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind. You ever meet Lenny?"

"Nope."

"Well, he's a fairly lovable dink. He's nice all the time, likes everybody and his brother, and twice on Sundays. I didn't know until just recently he was loaded. His father is . . ."

". . . Cascade Art Imports."

"Yeah. Which is where your sister comes in. Lenny's just a lonely little guy with a big old nest egg, and I think your sister convinced him they were married and took him for as much money as she could get

before she split. Now he misses her something awful and only wants her to come home, but he's at a loss as to where she is. That's where I come in. I can find people and things that are missing. All he wants is for her to come back. There's lots more money in it for her. He doesn't care about that. He's just a big kid, really. He's in love the only way he knows how, and he wants his wife at home. That's all. No questions asked."

Tony still hadn't looked up, but he was sagging a little. "In your travels anybody ever tell you about Aggie's problem?"

"Which one?"

That made him look. "I'm takin' this crap from you because I know you're only tryin' to get at the truth, which, believe it or not, I hold sacred—but where my sister is concerned . . ."

"I assume you're referring to her memory problems."

He shook his head harshly. "It's not memory problems. It's a brain dysfunction as a result of what they call childhood trauma."

"Tell me about it."

"What'd you care?"

"I like to understand these things."

"If you can understand this one you're a better man than I am." He focused his eyes on a place in the room where he could see the past, the long-ago. "When Aggie was a kid, like grammar school, she and her buds were walkin' to school like they did every morning. Even though they weren't supposed to they took a shortcut through a lumberyard sometimes. Aggie's best friend—they were what you call inseparable—was foolin' around on a big pile of uncut logs or whatever. She was dancing, Aggie's pal was. She was queen of the hill. Aggie was yellin' at her to come down and screaming and crying because she could see the logs startin' to roll. Before anybody could do anything about it, the logs shifted big, and the kid got sucked into 'em. Took, like, fifteen minutes for the logs to settle, and everybody scattered. When it was all over they found the kid's body, looked like a bloody carpet. Every bone in her body'd been crushed to powder, they said. Aggie saw the whole thing, and she couldn't stop screaming. I guess they meant well, but the guys at the lumberyard just kept tellin' her it wasn't real, it didn't really happen, that thing over there wasn't her pal." He looked at me again. "So, anyway, that's the short version. The long version has to do with years of battin' around one goofy doctor after another. They're all quacks if you ask me. Anyway, what they tell me is that her troubles is the brain's way of dealin' with a problem. If it's too much to handle your brain actually does you a favor and

shuts down a little, so you can stop screamin' and get through the day. And that's how come she's got a problem."

I could tell he hadn't told the story all that often. I tried my best to ease him out of it. "So now she can't remember things right? Is that the deal?"

He nodded. "More like . . . she can't tell what's real and what's not. She can't tell the difference between something she's read and something she's done."

I tried to be soft. "You can kinda see why."

He shrugged, seemed to rally. "It's got a Latin name I can't pronounce, but it's something like amnesia, only a whole lot weirder."

I nodded. "Teeth said it was a reading problem. Kept her from medical school."

"Oh, it kept her from a lot more than that. See, when she reads something she's often not sure if it actually happened or not—just like she's not quite sure if the things that really do happen to her might not be made up. You get a lot of that in schizophrenia, so I'm told. So she's only supposed to read nonfiction, technical stuff. That's okay, as you might imagine."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. We sent her to some big deal school in London for a long time; didn't seem to do her any good as far as I could see."

"That's where she got the accent."

"It's all she got there, is what I think."

"I can see how this would be something of a problem in school."

"Yeah. So . . . but it's even worse where Lenny comes in."

"How's that?"

"Well, she wanted to help the guy, and she has some pretty unorthodox ideas about how to do it."

"I've heard."

"It's all legit—I read a book about it. This kundalini stuff, it's supposed to give you power. Power to heal . . . to influence . . . to help with the problems and all. It says in the book that your body is, like, a battery—you store up energy. Especially sex-type energy, if you do these exercises right—"

"Look . . . whatever. So your sister is into curing the sick of mind in a way consistent with the philosophies of Marvin Gaye. Cool by me."

"You don't get it. She's hoping to get *herself* fixed too."

"Okay."

"So along comes little Lenny, who's not gonna hurt a fly, and he's so sweet . . ."

". . . and he's very clean, have you noticed that?"

"Stop it. Lenny's a good little guy from all I can tell, so Aggie's got it figured they can both get some good all over 'em, so they go for it . . ."

". . . in the X-ray room."

He nodded. "Ya gotta have the lead lining, see."

"Right. Whatever."

"So she actually gets to like Lenny, and he's all in love with her and everything, and so it's all fine until one night they go over to his place. Ever been there?"

"I like the lions on the banister."

"She makes the mistake of snooping around while he's out in the kitchen fixing tea or some crap, and she comes across his diary, which is, like, laying out, open, in the den."

"Uh-huh."

"So before she can stop herself, she's reading these little sections—what's the harm? It's a diary, supposed to be all facts. I don't know what's really in 'em, but somehow she gets the idea that she's the perfect match for Lenny. In fact . . ." He closed his eyes. For a second I didn't know what was going on with him. He couldn't talk.

"Tony?"

He opened his eyes again, but wouldn't look at me. "She somehow got the idea that Lenny . . . made her up."

The room was close, and the muffled noise of awful music and the crummy overhead fluorescent suddenly made me very, very cold. I didn't remember exact quotes from the book I'd seen in Lenny's den, but something like *I invent my exact match, and there she is* was fluttering around my own short-term memory.

Tony went on. "I know it's wacked, but that's the deal with Aggie. She gets this stuff in her head, and it's there for good. All she could do was go with it."

"So she thought Lenny made her up. So she thought she was his perfect match. Yin to his yang, pardon my language."

He looked away. "I know it's hard to believe. I di'n' wanna believe it. Took me a while to work backward with her just figuring out it was a diary. But she was so happy. And so was Lenny. You know?"

And it looked to me like Tony the Boulder, crusher of unruly hooligans in a naked-dancer bar, was about to cry.

I shifted in my seat. "Okay. Let's say for one second—and I'm tellin' you this is gonna be a split second—that I believe you. Why does she leave? Why does she leave her perfect match, her inventor?"

He got ahold of himself. "She comes home to me one night, I mean, absolutely scared to death. All she could say was that somebody was trying to kill her, and that there was a monster loose—maybe she said in her head—and she needed to hide. I'm saying I hadn't seen her that bad ever, and I've seen her in mental hospitals pumped fulla some hellfire tranquilizer, strapped down to a gurney, still thinking she could fly—and tryin' to. And this was worse."

"What did you do?"

"I took care of her. I got her into bed. I got her to sleep. She's better now." He shrugged. That was that. "Oh, and by the way, she didn't take a dime from Lenny. Look it up. She's got twenty-seven dollars and some change in her bank account."

I sat back. "Okay. I got several choices: a) I believe you. b) You're in this with your sister and you're lying to me. c) Your sister is lying to you, hiding out until the coast is clear, and then skittering off to Europe where she has a ton of money in a bank account under the name of Serena Delgado."

"Serena?"

"Or whatever."

"I see your dilemma." He stood up. I looked around quickly for a blunt object, just in case. But as luck would have it he opened the door of the tiny office and gestured me first through the door. Then as I was standing he patted my arm. "Would it help if I took you to talk to her?"

And there it was: the Holy Grail. The thing I sought was within my grasp. But I didn't feel the tingle. I didn't feel the puzzle pieces falling into place. There was something wrong. I was missing something.

Tony looked around. "See, I don't like her to be by herself now, so I brought her here with me today. She's in the back somewheres."

I whirled around to face him. "You brought your wacky sister to the Tip Top?"

"She's been here before. And she's not wacky—she's troubled."

I just took in a breath and went with the river. That's the Taoist in me again. "Okay. Let's talk to her."

We sauntered through the vacant tables and the cigarette smoke, past the curtain to backstage, into the bright lights and the mirrors. Tony was in front of me, so I didn't see who he was pointing to when he looked over his shoulder at me. "Here she is."

He stepped away, and I saw Augusta Donne for the first time in person. I'm telling you, I actually had to catch my breath. Her hair was the color of autumn leaves. Her skin looked like marble—beautiful, soft white marble. Her eyes were so dark you could hardly tell what color they were. I couldn't take my own off her.

"Aggie, this is Flap Tucker. He's been looking for you."

She stood up. "Hey, Flap. You weren't Neena's husband, were you?"

"I was one of 'em."

She smiled. "Now she's in the clutches of the evil Dr. Schlag."

I nodded. "Probably the other way around, don't you think?"

She looked down. "They deserve each other, I guess."

Tony went to her. It was like he was the most protective older brother in the universe. "Where's your coat, sweetie? I thought we'd split and talk to the nice man."

"Hmm? Oh . . . I lent it to what's-her-name, the other redhead—the one that's going to Florida. She wanted to get something out of her car, but she didn't want to get dressed."

Somebody else spoke up. "Plus, it's raining."

I looked. It was our girl Beano. I nodded.

I'm not certain she even recognized me. She said, "Hey, snappy dresser. What's up?"

"Not much, Beano. How's the world?"

"Round and around and I can't seem to stop it." She did a hand motion to show me.

Tony looked around. "She went out to her car. When?"

Aggie squinted. "Actually, like about ten minutes ago. She does seem to be taking a while." She lowered her voice. "But then, I thought she might be in business."

I was wise. Sometimes a girl meets a nice fellow and that nice fellow has a little extra money he'd like to spend and the girl knows a nice car in the parking lot where they can go and he can enjoy himself for five minutes and the girl can have the money. That's what Aggie thought was happening. Although if I'd been her, I wouldn't have lent my coat to such an enterprise.

Beano shifted onto the counter in front of her. "Hey, it's her time up." She was looking down at her little cheat sheet like the other day. "I'm not goin' back out there. It's a tomb."

Tony sighed big. "I gotta go get her."

He didn't want to. It could mean a confrontation with a drunken paramour and an angry young woman who stood to lose money.

I looked over at him. "Need a hand?"

"Actually, Flap—that would be swell. Sometimes this kinda thing can be delicate."

He said it like it was a U.N. negotiation. I followed him. We motored down a dark hall toward a door that said, very clearly: NO EXIT. He shoved through it out into the rain.

The gravel underfoot was loud, and Tony wanted to make certain everyone heard us coming, so he was talking very loud and slow. "I guess we'll check over by the *red* car first, Flap." And he pointed to a hot Mercedes.

I helped. "Okay, Tony!"

But there was no movement of sudden discovery in any car. No flutter of wings, no shifting of gravel. Quiet as the grave—and twice as wet.

Tony was peeping in the several cars, and I went to check around the side of the building by the Dumpster, a lovely site for such an assignation. All I found was air, and not the high quality item either. You had to wonder if they'd ever emptied that Dumpster. I could hardly think, let alone breathe. Luckily, Tony called out.

"Uh . . . Flap?"

I came back around the corner. "What is it?"

He was squatting down between two cars, and for some reason I had it in mind that he'd found a wet stray cat that was in need of a dry place to stay and a little warm milk.

Instead, it was his sister's raincoat crumpled on the ground. It was covering what was left of the redheaded dancer who was going to Florida where it was safe and warm—the one whose name I didn't even know. She was just about as dead as you can get. Her eyes were still open, facing south.

# 15

## *Augusta in the Rain*

I looked over at Tony. "I can't stay here. The cops already don't like me today, and if they see me here with another dead body, they're gonna start to get the idea I'm bad luck. Plus, you don't want your sister around a scene like this. Let me get her outta here. I got a few things I have to talk with her about anyway."

I could see he didn't want to be there any more than I did, but this was his job, more or less, and I was his sister's ride. He covered up the dancer's face with his sister's raincoat.

He straightened up. "All right. But you go where I say, and you stay there till I get there."

"Sold."

We trundled inside from the back parking lot. He went right to his sister. "You're gonna go with Flap now. There's been a little problem."

She nodded. She didn't ask. I'm guessing she thought there was some hassle with the dancer and her newfound boyfriend.

I smiled. "I get to be your escort." I turned to Tony. "Where do you suppose we'll be dining?"

He looked at me differently than he ever had in our acquaintanceship. "How do you know I was gonna send you to a restaurant?"

"Makes sense. Public place; you probably know some of the staff;

lots of people to keep an eye on me, still pleasant for your sister—shall I go on?"

"So I'm not the only one in the world who knows a little bit of everything."

"I just hide my light under a bushel."

"Uh-huh."

"So what's the place?"

"Do you know the Colonnade?"

"Sure. Great pork roast and dressing." It was over closer to my side of town, a grand old South tradition on a street that was now beginning to fill up with clubs like the Tip Top.

He shrugged. "I like the chicken. As it happens I do have a few pals in the neighborhood. They'll make sure you stay put till I join you. They'll also make sure to tell anybody that asks: You've been there since an hour ago. So you'd better be . . ."

". . . leaving." I offered my arm to Augusta. "Shall we?"

She smiled sweetly. I could see she was used to doing what Tony told her to do.

Tony patted her shoulder. "Flap's okay."

She nodded.

He leaned over to me. "Do we have an understanding about what would happen to you if any—even the slightest—mishap should befall my baby sister?"

I was full of assurance. "It's better than an understanding, Tony. I consider it a legally binding contract."

That seemed good enough for him. "Okay. I'm callin' the cops. You're goin' to eat." And he spun around like a military guy, headed for his office.

Augusta and I made it through the club and out to the front parking lot without a word. The music was too loud for conversation anyway, and even the two goofy high-schoolers were gone. The place was completely empty. We just moved as fast as we could out into the rain.

As we slipped into my car I glanced over at her. I couldn't help noticing how much she looked like the other redhead in the back lot with the rain all falling on her hair and her pale skin wet.

I started the engine; backed out slow. She finally broke the silence. "I forgot my raincoat."

I didn't look at her. I was busy pulling out into traffic. "You don't want it now anyway."

"Really?"

"What's-her-name? The girl that borrowed it. Do you know her?"

"No. She was leaving, I know that. Going to Florida."

"Yeah."

"Beano's the one everybody knows."

"She's a card."

"She's a drug addict, and she'll be dead before she's thirty."

Well, of course that put a damper on the conversation. I cleared my throat. "Why do you say that?"

"Those girls—what chance have they got?"

"Everybody's got a path in life, you know?"

"What happened to her? The one in the parking lot. Boyfriend beat her up or something?"

Despite everything, honesty is the best policy. "She's dead."

She didn't believe it. "He killed her?"

"Somebody did."

Her voice was very soft. "She's dead."

"Uh-huh. You actually see the guy?"

"No. No, in fact I was only assuming there was a guy. She just said she wanted to get some tapes out of her car."

"So it could have been something other than . . . a 'lovers' quarrel.' "

"I can't believe this."

"I know."

"And those two just recently—I mean, is somebody stalking those girls? What kind of a sick mind . . ."

"Speaking of which, why'd you wanna get into psychology anyway?"

She settled back, adjusting to the changing direction of the talk. Maybe she was wise to my motives. Maybe, also like me, she just didn't want to talk about dead people. "I assume you're familiar with some of my problems?"

I nodded.

"It's common for a person in my situation to think that a study in the problems of the mind can be beneficial to humankind and still be of some help personally so that the duality of the benefits is very appealing especially when you're an adolescent girl trying to figure out what's going on in reality out there and you're looking for a career that also has some obvious financial possibilities but you're afraid that a normal life is out of the question because of some quite apparent difficulties only you're hoping to change all that in so many ways."

And that was the first indication, to me, of her true personality. She was almost afraid to stop the sentence before she'd crammed

everything she was thinking into it. She was simultaneously touching reality and testing it.

I took a quick look at her profile. "But your . . . reading problem got in the way."

"Yes."

"And now you're on the lam from Lenny, who, incidentally, thinks he's married to you."

"He is. But I don't want to talk about Lenny."

"I bet."

"I mean it. I've got some confusion there." She tapped her forehead.

"Uh-huh. Like what?"

"Like I made a mistake."

"Mistake?"

"I must have gotten hold of some . . . erroneous information."

"Such as?"

"Such as I think he's trying to kill me."

"Lenny?"

"Yeah, I *know* that Lenny's not really capable of that, which is why I *know* I got hold of something incorrect, which is why I *really* don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"So you musta read something about a murder."

"Maybe I saw a newspaper about the two girls at the Tip Top and the connection with Tony made me look and I somehow got mixed up about Lenny . . ."

". . . because of his diary or whatever it is that he keeps open in his den."

"So I've been told."

"So, like, now that you've been told, it doesn't clear the smoke?"

"I wish it did, but it doesn't work that way. I can see logically and intellectually that what I know to be true in my heart is, in fact, fiction—but I can't seem to convince my solar plexus."

I started to argue, but I suddenly remembered what it was like to *know* with every fiber of my being that Neena was a wrong deal and still not *believe* it for a good long while. That's the issue: the power of belief. Doesn't matter what's really true, just matters what you believe to be. And I didn't have the problems that Augusta did.

I just nodded. "So it doesn't help to talk?"

She seemed to move deeper into confusion. "Sometimes."

"Look, Lenny wants you back. You know he's just a little kid in some ways. He doesn't understand why you're gone; he doesn't care

why you left. He wants you to come home. What's so wrong about that?"

"I know, I know. I just can't get out of the feeling . . ."

". . . that he wants to kill you? I don't even think he's capable of *accidentally* hurting you."

"I know. Still—there's a demon after me."

She wouldn't budge. There was a lot more wrong with her than I'd imagined. We drove the rest of the way across town in silence.

The Colonnade is next to a motel and across the street from a new topless joint. It used to be the place to go for Sunday dinner after church. Maybe it still is, but the neighborhood is certainly stranger. We pulled into the parking lot.

It was still a little early for the supper crowd, so we got a table right away. I didn't have to think twice about which busboy was Tony's friend. He even winked at me. I told the waitress we were going to take our time and that someone would be joining us later for dessert.

"Okay by me, hon, you stay just as long as you like."

"Really? How about we find a nice cot then? I'll just eat till I can't move, roll over and go to sleep, and get up for breakfast around ten."

"Better make it nine, hon: Biscuits'll be gone by ten."

"Nine it is. And I'm now thinkin': *really* big tip for you."

"You all want sweet tea?"

We nodded. She left.

Augusta put her napkin on her lap. "You can tell a lot about a man by the way he flirts with a waitress twice his age."

"I wasn't flirting, I was just polite—and she's not nearly twice my age."

"Still."

"Okay, I give: What can you tell?"

"I can tell you're a nice guy."

"Ah, well—that's true."

"So go ahead and ask me what it is you really want to ask me."

"Okay, let's take our time. We got tea, we got food, we got dessert, we got Tony—all that's gonna take awhile."

"So?"

"So tell me about Teeth."

"He's a good guy. He didn't kill Ruby."

"I agree."

"He and I used to talk about tantric Taoism, believe it or not."

"As it pertained to your clinical beliefs."

"Oh, you know about that?"

"People love to gossip."

"I guess."

I looked away. "You knew Neena?"

"Sure. You can't be in the same city as Neena and not know her, can you?"

"Probably not."

"I think it was Dr. Schlag's fault that she left you."

"I know you think that, but honestly it was all for the best."

"Oh, I agree."

"So you and Teeth used to talk about the healing practices of the ancients."

"He talked about sex. I talked about science."

"Uh-huh. It all amounted to the same thing in the dark, didn't it?"

"More or less."

"Okay, look—excuse me for askin', but how is your dancin' little Lenny around the X-ray room that much different from Dr. Schlag jazzing Neena when she was . . . under his care, and I use the phrase advisedly."

She looked down. "Maybe it's not."

"And you both got fired."

"But Lenny got better. Neena got weirder."

"If possible."

"Uh-huh."

The waitress brought our tea, and the busboy made himself obvious in the doorway of the kitchen.

I leaned back in my chair. "Okay, here's the question: What made you leave Lenny—really?"

She sunk down a little in her own chair. "I don't know. I somehow got it in my head he was trying to kill me. And knowing what I know about Lenny, it was in *my* head, not his, don't you think? So it must be the demon."

"Demon, yeah. I'd say so. You musta read something else." But I couldn't help the creepy sensation I was getting. Images of Ruby in a pentagram, and the Golden Potala family saying some kind of Buddhist prayer to keep away the demon—they kept crawling up the back of my neck.

"I guess. I never know." She picked up her tea; I could see her hand was shaking. "Do you think I'm a fictional character?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, but I'm not playin'."

"Sorry?"

"I'm not buyin' the helpless poor-little-me-I'm-so-confused-maybe-I'm-a-made-up-story-and-not-a-real-live-girl thing. You know what your story is. You got a little memory problem, is all. I got pals I knew in the hospital who came back from the war lots worse off than you. They still think they're in some little hole in the ground and they can't get out and they probably never will. You get to have a job and a life and a rich boyfriend, so excuse me if I don't buy how awful your life is."

"I guess it's all relative."

"So tell me again why you left Lenny."

She didn't look at me, and she put her hands in her lap. "I got the idea he was in on some big scheme or something." She lowered her voice. "He was performing hideous rituals."

"Well, that's Lenny all right."

"I know, I know. It's obviously something I got hold of in some crummy paperback or article, but I don't remember. The knowledge that it's not real does nothing to keep me from being, like, completely spooked."

"Jeez."

"Plus, all your disdain aside, you can't imagine what it does to your self-esteem to think that it's possible somebody else made you up. You can't imagine being so disoriented all the time that it's just possible that all your life is a play. That any minute the director'll stop everything and come over to you to talk about what's wrong with the scene or your accent . . ."

". . . or your motivation?"

"Go ahead. Make fun. You can't make me feel worse."

"And what about your phony accent?"

"You go live in London for six years. Why are you being like this?"

"I just don't believe you, is all."

"Yeah, well, maybe that makes two of us. Maybe I don't believe me either."

For a second I thought she'd cry. The waitress came back with a basket of rolls and soda crackers, a plate of butter, and some extra lemon for the tea.

I buttered a cracker; she sipped her tea. All of a sudden she sat up straight as a tombstone. "Look, I can't just ignore the fact that I'm worried about getting murdered and a girl dressed in my raincoat was just killed right in the parking lot of the place where I was sitting

patiently waiting for her to come back and she was just as redheaded as the day is long and about my size. I didn't make that up, did I? I mean, didn't you tell me all that?"

I set my cracker down. "As it happens, I myself was just turning over those events in my mind. I have several possibilities: a) Somebody's stalking girls at the Tip Top. b) Somebody's following you—I agree with the raincoat/hair theory as you've just proposed it. Or c) somebody's tryin' to get me in trouble."

She raised one very beautiful eyebrow. "Why would anybody want to do a thing like that?"

"Believe it or not, it often happens when I'm working. Somebody gets the idea I'm a wise guy, and they try to cause me harm. Generally, however, I follow my own path and avoid trouble."

"You don't always know when trouble's ahead."

"I always have a feeling."

"That's what Tony says."

"Tony doesn't realize the extent of his gifts."

"Maybe."

"That's what makes him all the more gifted."

"Uh-huh."

"Plus, I hear he's a great gardener."

"Perennials mostly—he's nothing with spice."

"So I'm told."

She relaxed a little. "So you think it's possible that I'm not completely paranoid?"

"Oh, I think you're pretty nutty. You're much worse off than most people think you are, including your brother. And I still think you're out for Lenny's money. Plus, you remind me a little too much of Neena for me to trust anything you say. But the facts are fairly strange. You don't see a dead body in the parking lot every day of the week."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying the jury's still out."

"On?"

"On nearly everything."

"Except for the fact that I'm into Lenny for his money."

I picked up my cracker and bit it. "Okay, I'll even suspend that one. Maybe you are and maybe you're not. Maybe it's true love ways. I'll wait and see. I'll live and let live. I'll laissez-faire—at least until dessert. But I got my suspicions—about you *and* your brother."

Dinner came. The pork roast was superb. She had the chicken. We

ate slow and didn't talk. We were just ordering coffee when Tony came in. He was in a different suit. He waved at the busboy.

When he sat with us the waitress didn't even ask him what he wanted. She just brought him the key lime pie and a bourbon on the rocks. Did I mention that the Colonnade has a bar? He didn't say a word either. He ate his pie in three bites, and the bourbon was gone a second later.

I sipped my coffee, damned if I would speak first. Finally Augusta couldn't stand it. "So what happened?"

Tony pushed the plate away from him and sat back. "Cops came. They thought it was the same guy as before because she was strangled the same way: some kind of very silky cord around the throat."

That got the better of me. "You're kidding."

"And they found no fingerprints."

I tried to sip my coffee, but I wasn't as cool as I wanted to be. "Tony—what the hell's going on?"

"Somebody's killin' my girls." He seemed genuinely dazed.

Augusta lowered her voice. "I know I'm paranoid and I'm certainly not in my right mind at the moment, but has it occurred to you that this girl had red hair and was wearing my raincoat and it was a little dark outside and maybe the guy thought that was *me* out in the rain?"

Tony looked like somebody had told him the Pope was wrong. "Jesus, Aggie, that's right." I think he actually started to sweat.

And odd as it was, fate had cast me, for a brief moment, as the voice of reason. "Who knew you were there, Aggie? How would anyone have known you'd be there and wandering around in the parking lot? Doesn't make any real sense."

They both relaxed. Tony nodded. "Yeah. Don't make any sense."

But I wouldn't let it go. "Not with the facts we got now. Although I suppose there could always be someone stalking you for other reasons. Some nut you took care of at the GIMH, some drunk Tony may have offended at the Tip Top. And you do look a lot like her. Only I guess this absolves Teeth for the moment. At least from this one, you know, since he's already in jail. However, as I was saying, the jury's still out on you"—I turned to him—"my good friend Tony. You're the one with the opportunity all over the place to kill the poor kids. Motive? I dunno. But everybody's nuts at least one day outta the week. So how come *you're* not the killer? Tell me that one."

That did it. They were both nervous again. Always keep things up in the air if you can. It gives you an edge. I had no idea if I meant all

that or not, but it was good to shake things up. Plus, I didn't trust anybody at that moment.

I finished my coffee in a gulp, before Tony could think of what to say. "Well, if there's nothing more, I've had a longish day. I'd just as soon be going."

Tony looked at Augusta. "He say anything to you?"

"He said a lot of things to me, but he was right about most of them. And at least I've gotten him to reserve judgment on me until all the facts are in."

I leaned forward. "Except I waited for this one until Tony got here: What's the possibility somebody could slip you something and get you to read it before you knew you were reading it?"

She was baffled. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, like, could someone, if they knew your problem and wanted to, could they slip a paragraph or two into, say, a patient's chart, for example, or something innocuous that you'd have to read?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Is it possible Teeth played a little joke on you getting you to read about tantric sex practices—and that's what got you interested in that stuff?"

"Why would Teeth do that?"

"Why do people slip stuff into other people's beer at parties? It's a kind of twisted notion of fun. Plus, Teeth was bored and he liked to talk—especially about that. What's the harm? You had a lot of long nights together with nothing better to do."

She squinted. "I guess it's possible, but I don't think it happened."

I pressed. "Do you remember a night when Lenny and Neena and some guy got into a fight around a chess game and Neena bopped the guy pretty good and he went wacky and Teeth bit him and you came in with a sedative and it was a big ruckus afterward because the guy got a lawyer and Teeth got fired?"

She had no idea why I was bringing it up, but she nodded just the same. "I remember. That's the night I met Lenny, I think."

"What was Lenny trying to get Neena to do?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear."

"But you think that was the cause of the fight?"

"No, the other guy caused the fight because he made a pass at Neena. I saw that part."

"So after that, when Teeth was finally dismissed, you called Tony?"

"Uh-huh. Tony needed help; Teeth needed a job."

"And it was around that time that you got fired because Nurse Donna thought you were working too hard—excuse the term—on Lenny."

Tony laughed. "She was just trying to save her own sorry butt from havin' to do any real work. Aggie was twice the worker she was."

I nodded. "Even Donna admits that, or something like it."

Aggie leaned in too then. "Why are you . . . what's all this about?"

I blew out a breath. "Well, if I take a vacation on the idea that you're the evil wife out for Lenny's money, *and* I buy for a second the idea that somebody in the parking lot of the Tip Top thought they were getting *you* in a stranglehold, then I have to reevaluate almost everything I've been thinking so far about this whole business. I gotta start thinking in other directions, however odd they might be. I have to eliminate what I know to be false, and then whatever's left, however impossible it may seem, must be true."

Tony shook his head. "Yeah, but how do you do that?"

I stood up. "I got a system. I was interrupted by some nonsense when I tried to do it before, but I gotta go now and try it again." I looked at him. "Okay?"

He held me in his gaze a moment longer than he needed to, then he nodded. "Don't be a stranger."

I pushed in the chair. "You'll pick up the tab, I'll go talk things over with Ms. Oglethorpe, and then I'll hie me home for a visit to the Truth. You'll both be available by phone?"

Tony nodded again. "You got my number?"

"Brother, do I have your number."

But I was out the door before he could think of a snappy retort.

# 16

## *Early at the Majestic*

Since Tony had inadvertently prevented my eating dessert, I chose to complete my fine-dining experience back at the Majestic. A quick call to Dalliance first:

"Hey, meet me at the Majestic."

"Now?"

"Uh-huh. I gotta talk it over with you. I'm on the edge of an understanding."

"You do your thing?"

"Naw. Didn't I tell you I was interrupted by a call? From none other than our old pal Dannen Hilliard, actually."

"So you're gonna talk to me, then go home and do it?"

"Yeah."

"Be right there."

I didn't want to be at the club for some reason. Somehow the diner seemed more private. I parted the glass doors, found an empty booth, and slung myself down. Shortly thereafter I was eating chocolate pie.

The pie was gone and so was the rest of the daylight when Dally shoved into the booth and sat across from me. She didn't say anything. She just waited.

I finished off my coffee, looked at the tabletop. "This may be the weirdest situation you ever got me into."

"I told you."

I looked up at her. "You know, it's that I-told-you-so attitude you have . . ."

"I know. Drives people nuts."

"Actually, I was gonna say I kinda like it. It's endearing."

"Uh-huh. Tell me a story."

"I found Augusta."

"No, see: A story has a beginning and a middle, not just an end."

"That *is* the middle. We're a ways off from the end."

"Oh."

"Augusta and Lenny *are* in a marriage, of a sort. Augusta is the sister of a guy named Tony who's the bouncer at the Tip Top, which is how Teeth got a gig there. Teeth is in jail. Teeth is into tantric sex. And a new dancer is dead. I helped Tony find her body. Plus, it's just possible that the killer thought the dancer was Augusta. And did I mention that the two previously murdered girls had been in the trunk of the Buick for maybe a week or two before they were discovered? And did I mention they were lovers? Did I tell you Augusta is more nuts than any of her patients? And did I say that the only guy I'm certain *didn't* kill anybody is the guy the cops have in custody?"

She leaned back. "No, see: This is not good storytelling either. You gotta have a kind of once-upon-a-time mentality about it."

I ignored her. "And when I sat me down to do my magic thing, just as I was gettin' into it the phone rang, and it was Neena, outta the blue, with some wild hoo-ha about Tibet, and it got me off track."

But instead of rolling her eyes or poking fun at Neena, which ordinarily she would have done, she sat back up. "Tibet? What about Tibet?"

"There's a new Lama, but he's only a stooge of the Red Chinese. It's something about economic growth. But as I understand it that's a foundation of Marxism, right? Economics, class struggle, and . . . what's the third thing?"

"Maybe it's not coincidence."

"What?"

"You don't . . . even *you* don't quite realize the extent of your luck."

"I said: What?"

"I know you did. I'm telling you that maybe Neena's call was part of the thing, not a distraction."

"Okay, this is my third and final: *What?*"

"I just read in the paper—not in the news part, in the business section—this thing."

"About . . ."

"About the new proposed import deal with the Red Chinese: They're gonna start to sell off some religious artifacts from Buddhist Tibet—for fabulously inflated sums of money. And the deal's been in the making for a while now. And it was looking good because the new Lama . . ."

". . . is a stooge of the Red Chinese . . ."

". . . like you said, but here's the *connection.*"

I closed my eyes. "Don't say it."

Even with my eyes closed, I knew she was nodding. "The deal is supposed to be with that well-known international company, Cascade Art Imports. Only it looks like it may go south on account of the bad press with the fake Lama."

In the movie version I think there would have been lightning and thunder or a dramatic rising of the underscoring. As it was, we had to settle for the neon in the window blinking out. Not the whole thing, just the part that said EGGS ANY TIME.

Dally was staring at me when I opened my eyes. I looked over at the window. "I guess they ran outta eggs."

"You better go home right now. You've got to get to the bottom of this one quick."

"I called you here to listen. I have to sum up, I have to get in my head the events of the past couple of days, all right? So just sit back."

She sat back. "Okay, but make it a better story than you had going a minute ago."

"Once upon a time there was a guy who said 'shut up' to his best friend."

"Fine."

"The players: We start with Teeth. He didn't kill Ruby; he loved Ruby. He and Ruby were into tantric sex and it made 'em wacky in the nut—"

"The technical, psychological term."

I nodded. "And Teeth really believes that Ruby was killed by a demon, but it's okay because Ruby got to the pentagram soon enough to save his soul. Now Teeth is in jail because the cops realized, finally, that he was at least a nominal connection between Ruby's murder and the two dead girls in the Buick."

"Make a great band name: Two Dead Girls—"

"I'll never get to the punch line if you keep interrupting."

"—in a Buick. I'm finished."

"Next in our merry band: Looney Lenny, the sweetest little guy in

town. Turns out he's not just loaded, he's fabulously loaded, and he's got a swell house not far from here with lions on the banister. All he wants is his wife back."

"Which is your main job."

"Check. But I get a glimpse of his diary or something open in his den, and it's pretty odd: like he made up his wife. Like she doesn't really exist except in his mind."

"Except you've seen pictures."

"Gets better, but wait. Then I go to where the girls were found, meet a nice girl named Kay. Know what she told me? That the guy they got to tow the car away is the one who discovered the bodies."

"No."

"And do you know how he discovered the bodies?"

"No."

"He smelled them."

She blinked. "In this cold snap? That means . . ."

I nodded. "They were in there a while. So I hie me to the club Tip Top, a rollicking establishment on the other side of town, and what to my wondering ears do I hear?"

"I give."

"The two girls were in love. They shared a life together. They were in real estate school. It could have been something beautiful."

"Uh-huh."

I slumped a bit. "Honest to God, Dally, I wish you could have seen their sad little digs. Woulda tore you up. And . . ." I produced from my pocket the two heart chains and showed them in the palm of my hand.

Dally nodded. "Ankle bracelets."

"Does everybody figure everything out before me?"

"What did you think they were?"

"Anyway, I found out they were ankle bracelets and I think they belonged to the girls. I found one close to where the Buick was parked in Buckhead. But . . ."

"I knew there'd be something about this."

"I found the other—be glad you're sitting down—in Ruby and Teeth's backyard."

"Get out."

"I'd like to, but I promised everybody and his brother I'd finish this thing."

"Are you sure they belonged to the girls?"

"No, but it's a pretty weird coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"And I'm taking 'em over to Paul at TECH. Maybe he can tell me something DNA-wise or blood-wise or whatever."

"He's a biology teacher."

I lowered my voice. "He's done this sort of thing for me before."

"Still, you've got to have a sample of the girls' actual—"

Before she could finish I produced from my coat pocket two hairbrushes, each in a little Baggie. "I snagged these when I was at the girls' apartment, whilst the landlady, a former stripper herself, was not looking. Got 'em outta the bathroom—you shoulda seen the tile work."

"Sometimes you fascinate me."

"I secretly fascinate you all the time. But enough about me. There I am at the Tip Top, and who should I meet but a coke-head dancer called Beano and a redheaded kid whose name I never knew who was so scared by the deaths of her two compatriots that she was about to take a powder."

"So the atmosphere at the club was . . ."

". . . depressing, like all those places. Speaking of which, my next stop was the House of Pain . . ."

"GIMH."

". . . where I discover Lenny's *not* making up this alleged Augusta, but she is in fact none other than Augusta Donne, nurse's assistant, quite real and in some circles fairly beloved."

"So she worked at GIMH—she wasn't a patient."

"That's what I'm saying. I showed her picture around, and all I could get was she was fired around the same time as Dr. Schlag—and for something of the same reason: She and Lenny were caught at least twice in the X-ray room with their pants down."

"So that's why he thought he was married to her."

"There's more. I get her last known address from the files there at the hospital—"

"How did you swing that?"

"I'm fascinating, remember? So I go to this last known address, and who comes to the door?"

"I give."

"Lenny. It's his house. On St. Dominic."

"Wow." She sat back.

"Uh-huh, and that's where I read this weird diary about how he made up Augusta, only now I know she's a real live girl. Then he tells me I'm part owner of the Easy."

"I saw this part. Skip on down."

"Okay, so then I went home and tried to do my magic whatcha-callit, and Neena called."

"Which is *so* spooky given what we know about the . . . thingus."

"Right. So anyway, since she called, I'm bad luck."

"Such as?"

"I went to visit Teeth; he got arrested—right after he told me, incidentally, that Augusta is the sister of the bouncer at the Tip Top, which is how Teeth got his new job."

"It's a small world after all."

"Then, when I went to the Tip Top, the redhead who wanted to go south?"

"You really need a program with this story."

"Remember I mentioned her?"

"All right."

"She's dead, in the parking lot of the club, in Augusta's raincoat. Now I'm thinking maybe Tony the Boulder is the killer."

"But he's not."

"Well . . ."

"Why is she wearing Augusta's raincoat?"

"I was hoping you'd ask. Augusta was at the Tip Top. I found her."

"You found her?"

"I had dinner with her."

She whispered, "Well then: Case closed." But I knew she wasn't serious.

I shook my head slowly. "Not nearly."

"Who killed the redhead?"

"Got me. I split and went to the Colonnade."

"I love their pork roast."

"And anyway, you can't possibly imagine how wacky this kid Augusta is. She's in some way convinced that Lenny made her up. She's also afraid there's a demon after her, like there was a demon after Ruby—and she's also very, very attractive."

"A demon?"

"There's somebody trying to kill her. Which, for a minute if you believe, fits the dead-girl-in-the-parking-lot-in-her-raincoat picture. Not to mention Ruby in a pentagram hiding from the demon, and my friends over at the Golden Potala who are scared of a monster in bad slacks and worried about getting their own personal effects out of none other than Red Chinese-tainted Tibet, which is really another kettle of

fish altogether—except for the fact that it's a kettle stirred up by all this trade-deal-Cascade hoo-ha." I sat back. "So now: The End . . . so far."

"But she's still nuts."

"Augusta? Oh, yeah."

She flung herself forward. "So . . . now, how in the hell does all this fit in with Cascade Art Imports, again?"

"I dunno exactly. But I'm telling you it's a pretty weird coincidence with Linda's family, not to mention that the rest of the planet is screwed if Tibet goes under."

"What are you talking about?"

"There are guys in Tibet who pray and turn wheels and breathe a special way and all—some of 'em are even in Linda's family. These guys think they're the only thing keeping the world together, keeping the dark forces in the universe at bay. They've had this gig since the beginning of time, and if they stop now . . . darkness wins."

"You believe this."

"Not really. But, you know—what if? What if they're all that's keeping us outta the soup? You wanna take that chance?"

"Go home and get into your magic lantern and put this thing in its place—for both of us—or for humankind, whatever."

I smiled. "Okay. I will."

But she wouldn't let it go at that. "Flap, this one is pretty strange, right?"

"I guess."

"I mean, it's not every day you find a dead body in a parking lot, right?"

"Not every day."

"So you gotta be a little extra careful."

"You too."

She didn't quite understand. "I will."

"The killer, whoever, goes after women, and men who dress like women—either way, I'm safer than you, right?"

"A little. How does he feel about women who dress like men?"

I hadn't noticed. She was wearing a man's suit again, fifties style this time, skinny tie and all. I smiled. "You do look pretty sharp—but nobody's gonna mistake you for a guy, not even from a mile away."

"Uh-huh. I'm saying be careful."

"I'm sayin' *okay.*"

I reached for my wallet, but she got the tab. "This one's mine, pal.

Just go home. Let's get this one over with; get back to what we laughingly refer to as a normal life."

I tipped my imaginary hat to her and shuffled off toward the door. Imaginary hat, imaginary wife, imaginary magic at the top of the world. Maybe good old Lenny was the only one with a real grasp on the whole thing at that.

# 17

## *The Golden Curtain*

My apartment was dark. The whole world seemed dark. I didn't turn on any lights this time. I went straight to the phone and unplugged it. Then I took off my coat and sat at the dining room table again, straight as an arrow, and tried to breathe like a baby, so I couldn't notice it. You breathe in, you breathe out. That's all. It's all quiet and easy.

The traffic was quiet too, for a change, which was a break. Usually you could hear a siren or a gunshot or a scream—but just now the world was soft. I tried not to think about anything, and if something came into my head I tried not to hold on to it, let it drift out, like on the water. That was it: the water of it all, in me and outside of me.

And after a pretty good while, when it was all water, I opened my eyes to the golden curtain. There it was. But you have to not notice it so much or it goes away. And the angel is even more skittish. If the angel comes, you can't let your mind go: "Look, an angel!" That chases the whole thing away. You just have to sit there. You have to not be distracted. You have to focus and not focus. You have to be in the middle of everything.

By and by the angel came and tossed up the puzzle, and all the pieces were like rain in slow motion falling on the surface of the water, making ripples, and all the images were drifting in and out: There was Lenny, the house where he lived, Teeth's backyard, the painting of

Ruby as the auburn-headed Venus, the big blue Buick, the parking lots, the naked women, a barstool at the Easy, the beatific face of Dalliance Oglethorpe, the broad, trusty shoulders of Tony Donne, Augusta's reddish hair, the copper of the leaves raining down in Decatur, Lenny playing with his little paper airplane, Lenny playing with his little paper airplane—and grim-faced monks in saffron robes at the top of the world, who looked like Linda's father, spinning prayer wheels shaped like the Golden Potala as fast as they could to keep away the darkness.

When everything settled it was like a beautiful oil tapestry on the surface of the water, so transparent you could see down into the depths. But the image wasn't complete. It couldn't have been. It wasn't right.

There was Lenny in the center of it all, sitting on a lion's head, holding a red rope that seemed to tie him to every other piece of the puzzle. Overhead there was a blue-gold half-moon. And like the Three Graces in a beautiful pre-Raphaelite pose, Augusta, Neena, and the dead Florida dancer stood—three redheads. Finally, a lonely little boy in a red cap sat in the center of a mound of gold and jewels, crying. All the other pieces but those three began to drift away on the tide. And everywhere there was the smell of mint. Then Neena winked.

She looked right at me and winked, and it startled me out of the trance. None of the puzzles had ever looked at me before. Suddenly there I was in the dark in my apartment, someone downstairs yelling at her pimp.

"You don't own me!"

"The hell I don't!"

"You don't own me!"

"Get in the damn car!"

"You don't own me!"

It was her mantra. I don't think it did her any good though. I could hear a scuffle and a car door and then the peeling of rubber as they rode off into the night.

I'm not usually brought out of the thing with such a shock, such a force. I didn't know what to do. But the image of Neena winking at me wouldn't leave—that and the strangeness of Lenny riding the lion with his crimson cord.

As soon as I could I stood up and plugged the phone in. I had to look through about a hundred pieces of paper stuffed into the phone book, but I finally found it: Neena's number in New Mexico.

I didn't know what time it was, but I called anyway. It rang ten or twelve times before she answered.

"Neena?"

"Jesus, Flap, that you?"

"Yeah."

"You're calling me?"

"No. I just gotta ask you a coupla things."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"No, I mean, what do you wanna ask me?"

"Oh. Do you remember a night in the looney bin when you were trying to play chess with some guy, but Lenny was talking to you about something and some big brouhaha ensued that got Teeth fired—do you remember that night?"

It took her a second. "Sort of."

"What was Lenny talking to you about?"

"God, Flap, I don't remember. I was probably pretty wacked at that point, you know."

"Think."

She took her time. "I popped that guy pretty good."

"Yeah."

"Teeth bit him."

"Hence the name."

"The guy was pretty mad."

"He made a pass at you?"

"That guy? Naw."

"What?"

"That guy didn't . . . we were playing chess. I was winning, of course. I think his king was at pawn two—"

"Neena."

"You want me to remember or not?"

"Pawn two."

"And Lenny's there—strange little guy—and he won't shut up and it's kind of distracting for the other guy, even though Lenny's only talking to me and I'm not distracted . . ."

"But you're winning."

"Of course."

"So Lenny's talking about . . ."

"Man, I hardly ever paid attention to him—you know."

"Uh-huh. Think."

I heard her shift the phone to her other ear. "Okay, it was something about Indian stuff."

"Like Native Americans?"

"No, like chakras and kundalini and how to arouse the sexual power in the universe, that stuff."

"What?"

"It had something to do with posture. Like this one where you stand on one leg and—"

"Dannen, are you telling me little Lenny was talking to you about spiritual sexual postures?"

"Yeah, and it cheesed the guy I was playing chess with—what was his name?"

"I don't know."

"Anyway, the guy got all bent outta shape and he goes, 'Try this posture,' or something on me and I got evil."

"How?"

"Stuffed his jewels back in him."

"Right. And thereby . . ."

". . . mayhem ensued."

"I'd imagine."

"Teeth bites man. Man sues Teeth. Teeth gets fired. The world goes 'round. Why do you ask?"

"Lenny was talking to you about tantric sex."

"He was?"

"Did he want you to play?"

"Did he want me in the postures of India? Yeah, maybe. That was part of it. But it wasn't a weird thing. It was kind of sweet, in a way. You know Lenny."

I took a breath. "Maybe."

"And anyway, I'm naturally a blonde. He said it had to be a real redhead."

"Right. And *your* red was mainly from the henna plant."

"You wake me up to insult me?"

"No, that's just a bonus."

"Well, thanks, but I gotta get back to sleep."

"You don't want to know what this is all about?"

"Your case. You won't tell me. It's none of my business anyway. I'm busy. I'm sleepy. I got troubles of my own. Beware of the dog. Take your pick."

"Bad night?"

"Bad year."

"Okay, but maybe this'll help: You got me worried about Tibet. Turns out I sorta got friends there—friends of friends."

"So . . . it's personal. I know that goes a long way with a guy like you."

"Right."

"Hey, I'm good for something."

"Maybe."

"Yeah, well, thanks for calling." I heard a noise in her room, wherever she was, and then another voice. "Oh, man, I gotta go." She took the phone away from her mouth. "Jesus, Becky . . ." Then: "Flap, I gotta go." She hung up.

So that's what I was stuck with: Lenny at the center of it all. Maybe it was just the fact that Lenny had started all this, but maybe there was a whole lot more. He was talking to Neena about tantric sex before he met Augusta. And why did I repeat the image of the little paper airplane he played with when I was riffling through her room at his house?

See, all this is just like having a very vivid dream, only you're awake. Anybody can do it. And the images probably mean something, only you can't quite put it together right away. The eye beholds, but the mind does not see. It's a message in a bottle from yourself to you. Maybe it's something you've seen but didn't immediately understand. It works that way a lot. Sometimes the images really mean something wild—and sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. In most cases you have no idea. That's when you're glad you've got friends. You call them up; sometimes it takes a while to talk it over, but eventually the meaning comes into focus.

The main part of the message for me was that Lenny and Tibet and redheads were all connected and in the middle of the soup—maybe even asparagus soup. Beyond that, I couldn't tell you what the hell was going on.

So, this time without looking anywhere, I dialed the phone again.

"Hey."

"Flap?"

"Uh-huh."

"You do it?"

"Yeah, but it's a jumble."

I could hear the whisper of the covers as Dally sat up in bed. She was probably just getting to bed. I could hear her lighting a cigarette. Finally: "Start from the beginning."

"I know you like that—a beginning, a middle, and an end—but it's not really the way of the universe."

"Shut up and tell me."

"Lenny's in the middle."

"Sure, because it's his nickel. Not for him, we wouldn't be on this ride . . . right?"

"Maybe. But he was riding a lion's head, holding a crimson cord. Also in the middle were three redheads and a little boy in Tibet."

"I *told* you Tibet had something to do with it."

"No, I told *you* Tibet had something to do with it."

"No, Linda and her father told you. But you have a more important and—how shall I say this—*paying* customer to worry about right at the moment. Could just as well be that this thing with Linda and her dad can wait. And I told you about the *importance* of the Tibet thing first."

"Yeah, did you think that maybe all this *telling* me from everybody was what caused it to be in the dream thing in the first place?"

"Can that happen?"

"I don't know. I don't know how this thing works."

"I know. You've told me. What else was there?"

"I saw your face, Tony, naked women—"

"Natch."

"—shut up. Parking lots, Buicks, you know, the main things. But there was this one I don't get. When I was over at Lenny's house . . ."

". . . where he's got banisters with lions, which explains that one part . . ."

". . . yeah, and anyway he's kneeling on the floor in what he said was Augusta's room, playing with a little paper airplane that I didn't think anything about at the time . . ."

". . . but there it is in the dream thing . . ."

". . . three times."

"Bingo. We have a winner."

"What?"

"Three times a charm."

"I . . ."

"It means something important. Where'd Lenny get the paper?"

"I dunno."

"Think."

"Well, he ran up to her room before me, I took my time, cased the joint a little, and by the time I got there . . . it was a piece of paper he found in her room!"

"That'd be my guess."

"That he didn't want me to find maybe."

"I'm with you."

"That could have had something on it he didn't want me to see."

"Go on."

"And it was almost as if he was *taunting* me with it. Zooming it right in front of my eyes. And I just waltz on by thinking I'm the one with the handle."

"Boy, you *are* slow. What's next?"

"Like always: I improvise; answer some of the questions."

"Such as?"

"What if Lenny's not the guy he seems to be? What if Tony and Augusta got me suckered? What if something really is happening in Tibet? What if I mess with the whole international-trade thing? What if somebody gets killed again?"

"What if you just stay in bed?"

"Love to, but I got a million things to do. I gotta check the facts, I gotta clear the vision. Plus, I have to shake up international trade."

# 18

## *Kay Said Good-Bye*

I didn't want to wait for daybreak. I took a gander at the watch. It was two in the morning again, when every leaf is silver, when every sound is a sigh. If the moon was high and full, it would make the old neighborhood look like something in an old Disney animation.

I jabbed open the front door, but it was the only sound on the block. Even the crickets had gone to bed. I wanted to see who was awake at the Golden Potala, then head uptown, see could I catch somebody at the "art" cinema, get the name of the tow-truck driver. I had some questions bothering me I thought he might answer.

Every other building was dark, but the Potala restaurant was lit up like a candy store. Inside there were maybe a dozen diners: guys in bands after a gig, night watchmen just off the early shift, even an Asian family with two small kids, like it was their normal dinner hour.

Linda wasn't there, but I asked at the register, and her father was back in the kitchen.

I spoke to the guy at the register. "Would you mind tellin' him that Flap is here to see him?"

His eyes lit up and he practically ran back to get the old guy.

I took a seat where I could look at the window. The whole front of the joint was big glass windows.

Without a word the tea was there. The guy who'd been at the register brought it and stood waiting.

I finally figured out he wanted me to order something, so I obliged. "Maybe I could have an order of spring rolls?"

He was off.

In his place came Linda's father, very tired.

"Flap." He sat.

"Hey."

"You come to this next meeting."

I nodded. "Could be. I gotta wonder if your little problem and my missing-person case don't have more in common than I might have thought."

He smiled. "You know enough about the Tao to know that everything on your path is connected in some way or another."

And with a great flood of fondness for the old coot, I remembered how we used to sit and talk about that kind of stuff in the pre-Neena days. I think it had been around the same time I'd tried to ask Linda out on an actual date. It had been a long while since I'd been in just to talk like that, and I suddenly realized I'd been missing it.

I nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"So."

"I'm wondering about the new Panchen Lama."

"A fake. The ruination of my country." He said it plainly, without any noticeable emotion.

"I'm wondering how that affects this flow of artifacts or what have you that your family's been sending."

"The Chinese government is stealing everything with religious meaning and shipping it out of the country."

"And?"

"My family is in danger. But they have always been in danger."

"Could someone be putting the muscle on your brother to step up his . . . activities? I mean, could the demon-man somehow be aware of the availability of more stuff from your country now that all this Lama business has come down? And could he be pushing for more, a steady stream of artifacts, through your brother—especially seeing as how your brother is invisible and all? I mean, it gets him practically free artifacts that he can sell for a tidy profit."

He nodded, staring off into space. "That must be it. Brother give him some few things; this monster want more and more." He turned his eye on me. "How you know this?"

"I'm not quite as stupid as I look."

Before he could crack wise—if he was even capable of such a thing—my spring rolls arrived.

He stood. "So you come to the next meeting with this bad man and my brother?"

"Yeah. I will. When is it?"

"Dawn."

"Where? Here?"

He nodded. He started to walk away, then, without looking at me, stopped. "You got a gun?"

I made a face. "No. What'd I need a gun for?"

"You don't know how bad this man is. And this may be your last chance at him. He might be gone tomorrow."

I shrugged, took a bite of the spring roll. "So, problem solved, right? He's gone, no more hassle."

That made him turn and look at me. "He's gone, maybe no more brother, maybe no more family . . ." His voice dropped off. "Maybe no more world."

But I wasn't buying it. "Wrong. If he's gone, all it *really* means is that he's gone." Another bite of the roll.

He turned away again. "Spring rolls on the house tonight." And he vanished back into the kitchen.

Any place else I was a regular, that would have been no big deal. But I'd been coming to the Golden Potala for years, and this was the first time I'd ever had a bite gratis. Made me feel strange.

The drive down Ponce and then Peachtree at that time of night is pretty calm. Only the drunks and the cops are on the road, and I look to avoid them both, so it took me longer than it might have to get to the movie house.

Considering the hour, it was doing a fair business. Fifteen or twenty cars were in the lot. Still, there was plenty of space for me. I pulled in and glanced at the corner where the Buick had been. All the yellow police tape had blown away just like nothing had ever happened there.

The lobby was dark and the mildew smell was something to deal with. A round little guy was behind the counter. He didn't even look up when he spoke.

"Eight dollars. And we're about to close."

"Don't wanna see the movie. I'd like to ask you some questions."

Then he looked up. "About the girls in the trunk."

"Uh-huh. Where's Kay?"

"Quit."

"Really."

"You're not Flap, are you?"

"Maybe."

"If you are, Kay said good-bye. What were you, dating her? Old guy like you?"

"Speaking of which, you must be Jerry."

"I suppose I must be."

"So Kay said . . ."

". . . 'Bye. That's all. What can I do for you?"

"She go home?"

"She didn't tell me her life story, she just quit. I'll get another girl in a week. It's nothing. Is that all?"

"Can you tell me the name of the tow-truck driver who hauled away the big Buick where they found the girls?"

"The guy's *name*?"

"Or the name of the towing company."

"Why?"

"He smelled the bodies."

"So?"

"So I wanna ask him about it."

"Why?"

"I'm helping out with a family investigation."

"I think I'm about to understand something here. You came in and talked to Kay about the two dead girls and you got her all stirred up about how a girl could get dead in this town and she took off to Hicksville and now I gotta put an ad in the paper and interview and everything. You're something in the way of being a troublemaker."

"Not me."

"Well, you cause me trouble."

"Kay's the first girl that ever quit this palace?"

He blinked. "All right, so she's not. But you ran this one off with how safe it was in her own little town and how mean it is here in the big bad city."

"I thought she didn't tell you her life story."

"Didn't. But I'm wise to your type."

"Type?"

"You, my sleepless friend in the middle of the night, are the type that goes around listening to stories and getting answers—and often in

a town like this, that's trouble. You might get a reputation as a guy who wants to know something."

"Like the tow-truck driver's name."

"For example."

I thought about getting into it with the guy, explaining to him how it was, in fact, a mean old world and how it was all maybe coming to an end anyway because of the trouble in Tibet—but I thought better of it.

He finally gave in. "Triple A Towing. First in the book, like *A-A-A* Towing, right? As to who was the guy, I wouldn't have a clue."

I believed him. He seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn't have a clue about a lot of things.

"Okay, thanks. And if you hear from Kay . . ."

He didn't even look up. "I won't."

I let it go at that—he wouldn't. I was out in the night without looking back at the awful "art" house lobby, the way I imagined Kay had done. I didn't want to turn into a pillar of salt either.

I headed over to my friend at Tech with the hair samples, some ankle bracelets, and a dream in my heart. This guy Paul was an insomniac from way back; I knew he'd be in his lab. This was just the time of the morning he liked best: no students, no administrators, nobody else around—he could ponder the big questions. In the world of college biology he was something of a pop star. He ran DNA tests for his kids as a kind of magic show like on TV, a crowd pleaser to get them interested in some deal they had to pass to get out of college.

His office was in a crummy brick building surrounded by a lot of grander brick buildings. In my opinion the difference was facades. When you've got a nice facade the rest of the building can be crummy brick if it wants to, but without the facade what do you really have, after all?

And sure enough there he was, hard at work, bent over some microscope the way I see a lot of jazz piano players bent over the ivories. He was shaking his head and talking to himself.

I interrupted. "Hey, buddy boy."

He looked up. "Flap."

"Trouble in the microscopic world?"

"It's a big mess in there, Flap."

"How so?"

"The twentieth century? It's full of poison."

"Yeah. I can see that."

He stood up. "Well, come get a closer look."

I obliged. The microscope was the two-eye job, and it took a minute to adjust, and then all I saw was some sea-monster-looking little guys thrashing in a kind of milk.

"What is it, Paul?"

He leaned over, like he could see them with his naked eye. "Nobody knows, Flap. But it doesn't look good."

I stared at him. "Nobody knows what I'm looking at?"

"Nope."

"So what's the fuss?"

"Your sperm count's going down."

"But enough about my personal life."

He sat down. "No, not yours personally, yours generically. It's all going down, all over the world."

"You don't say."

"I wish I didn't. It's the last days, Flap."

"Uh-huh, but before you close up for good, could you run a few magic tests on some stuff I got?"

"Sure. What difference will it make?"

"I could get rich, and I could save the world."

He smiled wanly. "Well then I'll do 'er."

I produced the bracelets and the hair samples. "I wanna know, did the women who owned this hair also own these."

He peered down into my hand. "Ankle bracelets. Sure. No probs."

I didn't bother to respond. He took the stuff and disappeared. I knew I'd hear from him when he wanted me to.

Try finding a pay phone at 3:37 A.M. The phones at the college were off, and someone had hidden away the rest. They hide all the phones in town after midnight. I finally found a Waffle House open and a phone inside. The coffee was weak, the language was strong, and the phone took two quarters before it worked for me, but I got AAA Towing.

"Hey, where are you guys?"

"Right here, where are you?" A comedian had answered at Triple A.

"Looking for you all."

"We tow your car?"

"Nope."

"Then what?"

"I'm looking for the guy who towed the car with the two dead girls in the trunk. Thought I might come over and talk to him sometime."

"You from the paper again?"

"I'm just looking to talk to him."

"Hang on."

Before I could ask the comedian if he meant I was actually going to get a break, he tossed down the phone and it bounced hard on something—the floor, I guess. A minute later there was another voice on the phone. He wasn't nearly as funny as his compatriot.

"What?"

"I'm a friend of Kay's. You know, the kid who used to work at the movie house where you found the two dead girls in the trunk?"

"Kay? That sweet little thing? Whata ya mean, 'used to' work there?"

"She quit and went back home."

"Well, good for her. I always told her."

"Me too."

"So whata ya wanna know?"

"She said you knew they were there because you smelled 'em."

"I found two others like that. You can't describe that smell. It's not like anything else. Once you smell it and find out what it is, you can't forget it no matter how hard you try."

"Yeah, but didn't you think it was a little strange that you could do it considering how cold it was that week?"

"Yeah. I think they'd been in there for a good little while. Two weeks, maybe. One of the cops said they was just startin' to decompose."

"Did you see?"

"God, no. I got enough keeping me up nights."

"Right."

"Okay. Say, by the way, if you hear from Kay . . ."

"I won't."

"Oh. You two kids have a fight?"

I have no idea what story he'd made up in his head. I guess he thought maybe we were sweethearts and we'd had a tiff; she'd run home to Momma.

I smiled into the phone. I hope he heard that. "No. It's just that I think Kay's changing her life, you know."

"Oh, I know. I told her about that place. Still, if you hear from her, tell her Myron said good-bye."

Okay, so why were those girls in that trunk so long? It wasn't like

they'd sat in the parking lot for a couple of weeks. Myron had found them on their first night's visit. Somebody'd deliberately kept them around for a while. Still, no matter what the answer was, I was happy to have talked to Myron—and Kay. See, it actually was a pretty sorry world, and most people, weasels—but sometimes there's Kay and Myron. Reason enough to talk to them. My own personal Tao was watching out for me. I just needed a little reassurance that the last drop of the milk of human kindness hadn't been completely drained out yet.

And it was about at that point the lack of sleep was catching up on me. I couldn't figure anything out. I couldn't have opened a box of Wheaties without a set of instructions and a diagram. I stumbled onto my stool at the Waffle House and I drank me a lot of coffee; spilled a fair amount on my shirt.

The problem was, I was thinking. That always gets you into trouble. You start thinking too much, by and by somebody's liable to get the idea you're a wise guy—even you.

Nobody else in our little group seemed to be faring any better. I called Tony to check up on him—and to see how his sister was handling everything.

"Not good, Flap. It's been bad since dinner."

"How do you mean?"

"She's, like, worse than I've seen her in the scared department. Keeps wakin' up in the middle of the night, says there's a demon after her. Demon got Ruby. You know."

"Maybe she needs a hospital or something."

"Would you send your sister to GIMH?"

"Okay, maybe she needs some medication."

"Got it. She had some in her purse. I keep giving it to her, and it keeps her calm, but it seems to make her . . . confused."

"More confused? That can't be good."

"Flap, what's going on? What is all this mess? Who's killin' those little girls?"

"I'm workin' on it, Tony, but you know you're on my short list right now."

He ignored it. "What, exactly, are you doing?"

"I'm thinking."

He was quiet for a second. "Well, that's your problem. That's why you think I done it."

"Hmm?"

"You're thinkin' about it too much."

"Yeah, well, Tony—I gotta think about it. That's what I do."

"You gettin' outta the house? You *doin'* anything?"

"I'm *thinking,* Tony. Go take care of your sister. Tell her I said 'hey.' "

I hung up before he could answer. He made me mad because I knew he was right. I was ruminating. You don't want to spend too much time ruminating. It can give you the reputation of being a layabout.

Dalliance wasn't that much better. Her line was busy for a good while, and when she finally answered she could barely talk.

"Hello?"

"Dally? Is that you? What the hell's the matter? You sound awful."

"I got a migraine like Trotsky over here. I've had the phone off the hook."

"What?"

"I never had one so bad."

"What happened? What did you do?"

"Nothing. I feel like I got somebody else in my head doing road work."

"What?"

"What are you doing? How's it going . . . with the thing?"

"I'm thinking."

"Uh-huh. Well, when you *do* something, call me. Otherwise, just remember I want Kelly to sing *Angel Band* at my funeral."

"I'll call you later?"

"At least."

And she hung up.

That was it. I had to go for a drive, maybe. Late-night drive. Early-morning drive. It's good; clears your head. I tipped the counter guy five bucks for the Waffle House coffee, which I felt, even at the time, was seven too many.

Shortly, and before I quite knew what I was doing, I was at the Alhambra. I was in no mood to dally. I believe I mentioned before that under the right circumstances I could pop a lock on a cheap apartment just like eating a fine piece of pie, that easy. And my circumstances were right: too little sleep, too much thought.

A pin here, a dig there, and the door to 2B swung open. The room was even more depressing in the thin moonlight. I closed the door behind me and went straight to the window. The sad little photos were still there, the laundry baskets, not much else—like before.

I got down on my hands and knees and put my nose to the floor. Sure enough there were scrape marks, like a sofa might make. And there was even a fine distinction of color in some areas of the floor. Maybe it was because of the difference in the dust amounts, maybe the sun had bleached the exposed places, whatever. The story was the same: There had been lots more stuff in this dump than there was now. And it looked like some pretty serious scuffling had gone on, either moving the furniture or maybe even during some kind of fight.

I sat down on the bare wood. Two laundry baskets, two pictures of two each, two towels . . .

I went to the kitchenette. A broom and a dustpan stood side by side. The cleaning stuff was still sprinkled on the counter. The very old corn bread in the frying pan on top of the stove was half gone, just like the moon in my little vision. The double items added up to ten. The tenth month is October. The moon is half full on a certain day. I'm saying that I had the intuition that somebody was trying to tell me something. What it was, I had no idea. I was rambling to myself.

Then I heard people coming up the stairs. I slid forward and got into the bathroom. I didn't like the voices I was hearing; it sounded very much like they were coming my way.

A little tinkering at the door, and they were in.

"You get those pictures. I'll check in the bathroom."

Right. The bathroom. Like I said, the room was big enough to roller skate in, so I quick had to decide whether to hide in the tub behind the shower curtain or get in back of the door when it opened.

"What are you getting in the bathroom? I thought we got everything important before."

"He wants us to make sure."

"This is a waste of time. Let's *go*."

"I'm just checking one second in here."

I could hear that voice getting closer. I got behind the door; all I had time to do. It swung open and I held my breath.

I couldn't see who the guy was, but the voices were very familiar. He went straight to the tub and pulled back the shower curtain. That was his very first move, so I was lucky I wasn't standing there like a chump. He picked up something, maybe the soap or the shampoo. Then he was over by the sink. He took a quick look in the medicine cabinet, but I knew from my look the other day it was empty. He called out to his colleague.

"Nothing in here."

"Let's go. The place is creepy."

And bathroom guy walked out.

"Creepy. So get that stuff over there and we'll get outta here."

I heard them messing around in the kitchenette for a minute, and then the door closed and they were gone.

I'm pretty sure it was the two cops from Teeth's house—Tommy and the Veteran. That would have been a wonderful encounter:

*Oh, hi, Officers. I'm just here sliding on the floor. I really don't have anything to do with the murdered girls, really. You can believe me.*

Yeah. They'd believe me.

Too little sleep, too much thought. But I couldn't help thinking as I stepped silently out of the vacant apartment a minute later, closed the door, crept down the stairs: How come they broke in? How come they took stuff? Why were they sending in a clean-up crew?

Out in the parking lot the first light of day was shining and the birds were singing and you'd have thought the year was just beginning instead of coming to a close. I made a quick check: The guys were gone.

So that's what I get for doing something stupid. I nearly got caught someplace I didn't belong. First I was doing nothing, then I was doing something stupid. For some reason I can't figure, I found myself wishing I could talk to Kay. See how she was doing in her nice little home in the quiet little town. But Kay was gone. What was the matter with me? Maybe I needed some more coffee.

# 19

## *Golden Dawn*

The sun wasn't up yet over the vacant lot beside the Golden Potala. Some kind of dead weeds were shifting together in the breeze, and in the first shy light of day, in my sleepless condition, they looked like wheat—like a beautiful field of wheat. That's one of the benefits of long nights without sleep: morning makes everything beautiful.

I was out back, sipping from a paper cup of coffee that was too hot, too weak, and not sweet enough. I was beside a kind of loading dock out back of the restaurant. Considering I was in an alley by a Dumpster, it was all pretty clean. There was even some kind of flowering vine growing up over the curb, little purple flowers.

Linda wasn't in yet, but her father and her uncle were sitting on the curb, right by the little purple flowers, waiting for the demon to arrive.

I looked over at Linda's uncle. Introductions had been brief. They'd apologized about fifty times for the coffee, and the uncle was so nervous I thought he might jump out of his skin. I started talking just to calm him down. "So, this how it usually happens? You wait in the alley, he drops by?"

The uncle nodded, his eyes glued to the entrance of the alley. "He drive his car up. He get out. He look at me with the eye."

Linda's father nodded, looking at me. "Once you look into his eye, *you* tell *me* he's not a demon."

I looked back over at the vacant lot. "Windows to the soul."

They knew what I was talking about.

The uncle looked at the weeds. "I know this man is a demon. He showed me."

I sipped. "Showed you?"

"Terrible television show."

The father explained. "Videotape."

The uncle could barely talk. "Ritual slaying. Real."

I squinted. "Right, you mentioned something about that before. What was it, like, a snuff film, you're sayin'?"

They looked at me. Language barrier rears its ugly dragon head.

I shrugged. "Films like that? They're usually fake. He was just trying to scare you."

The uncle closed his eyes. "He show me the dead bodies."

And that's all he would say. Nothing more. I couldn't have dragged it out of him with a diesel engine and a sledgehammer. I tried. In the end we fell into the Big Silence.

Then it's the waiting that gets you. Being in the dentist's chair is not nearly so bad as waiting for it in the waiting room, to me. Getting popped in the nose is not nearly so bad as worrying about it the night before the fight. On the up side, they tell me it's anticipation that makes a kiss really swell, so I guess it all balances out in the end.

Seemed like an hour, but seventeen minutes after I'd arrived, a big gray Lincoln Town Car veered in slow, like a shark looking for breakfast.

Linda's relatives stood up.

The uncle whispered to me, "You got a gun?"

I smiled. "Don't even know what one looks like. Don't need to. What this guy wants is a little conversation."

The father whispered then. "What will you say?"

My smile got bigger, my eyes locked on the barely visible figure in the car. "Got no idea. 'The morning air is my voice.' Okay?" It was a quote from a poem we both liked, some old geezer from *ancient* China, long before the dynasties and worlds away from the Reds.

While it seemed to pacify the father, the uncle was more agitated than ever. "This man is not a human being. You can't talk poetry to him. He just need to die."

I shrugged. "Not my style."

But something was wrong. The monster in the car just sat there. I couldn't tell what was going on. The windows were tinted so you could barely see in, but nobody was getting out of the Lincoln.

I kept my eyes on the car, but spoke to the uncle. "So tell me again: This guy's been getting your family's effects and artifacts and whatnot for how long?"

"Long time."

"So how come you just now asked me to help?"

Beat. "Thought it would stop. Don't like to involve . . . excuse me . . . foreigners."

I assured him. "No offense taken."

He wouldn't leave it alone. "I mean, you seem to be a fine man, but you American people . . . are not like us."

"It's okay." Although I'd have to say I actually felt a little uncomfortable about the way he'd said it—*not like us.* It sounded a little too much like *not human.* So I pressed. "Still. You didn't even tell your brother until recently, right?"

His voice changed. "I didn't want anyone to know." He looked away. "And I thought we were protected. I thought no one would find out. I thought we were invisible."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I let him off the hook. "Okay." I took in a hefty breath. "This ever happen before, this standing here while he decides to get out of the car?"

"Never."

The light was only a little stronger, and the day was still trying to decide if it wanted to be cold or not. I rubbed my eyes and made a choice.

"You two guys just hold still; I'm goin' to speak to our visitor." And without any further thought, because fools actually do rush in, apparently, I lumbered toward the shark car.

It had an effect. The driver moved. I had the sensation he was reaching for something. I figured it was probably a gun. I was thinking what a cliché it was going to be for a guy like me to end up dead in a back alley at dawn. But for some reason the irony didn't make it to my feet—poor circulation, maybe—and I kept walking anyway.

Turns out the guy was reaching for the emergency brake, or maybe the gear shift to put it into reverse. When I got fairly close to the car it started backing away. It was slow, no panic. The shark had just decided it wasn't hungry, I guess.

I got a little cocky and waved at the guy as he backed into the street. It was hard to tell, but I think he waved back. And I think he had longish blond hair and a loud sports jacket—but there was something almost familiar about the way he waved back as he got the car in forward gear and pulled slowly away into the early-morning traffic.

My two companions were floored. For a second neither spoke. Finally the uncle, barely audible, spoke to his brother in their native tongue.

There was an answer, then Linda's father spoke to me in something resembling *my* native tongue. "What did you do?"

I was still watching the place where the car had been. "Nothing."

It was a very satisfactory answer to both of them. See, in a lot of your religions and philosophies around the world, "nothing" is actually the best thing you can do.

The father came up to me. "Could that be it? Could he be gone?"

But I was more worried than ever. "Oh, no, he's not. He's not gone at all. He's more *here* than he's ever been, if my current hunch is anywhere close to bein' accurate."

He actually put his hand on my shoulder, like Linda did sometimes. "What's the matter, Flap?"

I looked him in the eye. "The matter is, I think I know that guy. And it's so very *not* good you don't even know."

He didn't know what I was saying, but he let me use the phone in the restaurant to call up Dally anyway.

"How's the headache?"

Her voice was bright. "Better."

"Glad. Meet me at Lenny's. It's One St. Dominic."

She was excited. "What? You got something?"

"I just . . . wanted you there so we could collect our money. You know: I found Augusta, didn't I?"

"You know something you're not telling me."

"Okay, I haven't exactly figured out the trick thing myself. Even in the bold light of a new day, I can still be pretty much in the dark, you know. But something just happened that gave me a jolt. Plus, over and over again my mind keeps turning to Lenny and the lions and the little paper airplane." Not to mention how come those cops were breaking and entering just like me? But I didn't even mention that.

She was still sleepy. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Just meet me there in a half hour, can you?"

"My car's funny."

"Take a bus. It's six blocks down Ponce. It's no big deal."

She didn't know what was going on, but she knew from other calls like this one—late into the night, too early in the morning—that she had to get out of bed and jump on the ride. "I'll meet you. We'll get our money. All will be revealed."

I'd have to say I *let* her think that. She hung up and I dialed again. I called Tony; woke him up real good.

"What is it?" I could tell he was still really asleep.

"It's Flap Tucker. I know what's what. You gotta meet me at Lenny's and bring your sis."

"What? What for?"

"Because I know what's what. You care to find out who's killin' your girls?"

"Uh . . . yeah, I do. Where is it?"

"Aggie knows. One St. Dominic, just off Highland and Imogene, close to the Majestic."

"We'll find it. Take us, maybe, forty-five minutes. What's the deal?"

"All will be revealed."

"I'm not happy."

"But you're coming; you and Augusta are coming to Lenny's."

"Yeah—long as you don't think it was me no more." But he really didn't expect me to answer.

Okay: Sure, I didn't know what I was doing. But part of the charm of my line of work is the nature of improvisation. Jazz is everything. Sometimes you hit a clinker, but sometimes you soar with the angels. Sometimes you're Charlie Parker. And I was feeling pretty high. Something was about to happen at the home of Looney Lenny.

# 20

## *Streets of the Saints*

Only slightly more than twenty minutes later I was parking the car in front of Lenny's house on one of the streets of the saints. I figured I'd wake him up, but if he was the Lenny everyone thought he was, he wouldn't mind—and if he was the Lenny I was beginning to suspect, being awakened at an indecent hour was the least of his problems.

So I popped the knocker pretty good this time, like it was the cops or the landlord on rent day. And who do you think finally answered?

It was the Veteran and Tommy, my police friends. Tommy actually smiled. "Look who's here."

The Veteran shook his head at me. "Okay, I give: What are you doing?"

"My name is Flap Tucker. I'm a licensed private investigator, and I'm currently working on the whereabouts of Mr. Cascade's missing wife. Is he in?"

Lenny appeared out of the darkness in the hall. "He's a dick." He smiled at me. "Hey, Flap."

"Hey, Lenny. It's *private investigator.*"

"Oh." But I could already see a different Lenny standing there. I could already tell something different in his voice, and it was making the day a whole lot chillier.

The Veteran held out his hand. "License."

I handed it over.

Tommy peered around his partner's shoulder. "Nice picture."

The Veteran handed it back to me. "Carry a gun?"

I shook my head. "What for?"

The Veteran caught my eye. "Face like yours? I would guess a lot of people want to shoot at it."

Tommy shoved his way to me. "Let's just check."

It took him a while, and it was a little embarrassing for everybody concerned, but he found out I wasn't carrying a concealed weapon—like I said.

Tommy was mad again. Try as I might, I seemed to aggravate the guy. He thought real hard. "What are you doing here?" It was all he could come up with.

I peered around them at Lenny. "Could I come in? I've solved your case. Your wife will be here within the hour. Dally's on her way too, so we can settle up our financial account and I can be on my merry way. I haven't been sleeping that well lately, and I'd like to get on home. Or maybe I could have some more of that great java you get from Seattle. What was it?"

Lenny smiled. He looked at the Veteran. "He's leading you to understand that other people know he's here—that they are, in fact, on their way. Do you see that?" Chilly Lenny.

The Veteran nodded. Tommy seemed puzzled.

Lenny looked at me again. "It's Gold Coast Blend. I'll see if I can't get some for you, Flap. Come on in."

I stepped through the policemen and into Lenny's entrance hall. There were boxes and bags everywhere, and big white sheets covering some of the furniture.

"I thought you never went on vacation, Lenny."

He smiled. "I'm going to Paris—to stay. It's a little gift from my father."

"How's your French?"

*"Pourriez-vous me suggérer quelque chose?"*

"Yeah, I've got quite a few suggestions. But how about *Êtres-vous marié?* for starters."

He shrugged. "In the eyes of the law? No. I'm not *really* married. In the eyes of God, who's to say?"

I took in a deep breath. "So why am I draggin' myself all over town looking for Augusta?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Yes. You have done something of a better job at that than I expected. I never thought in my wildest dreams

you'd get this far in the game. Although I have a suspicion Dalliance might have been of some help in this regard."

"Your diction's improving. And by the way: *game*?"

"We'll get to that."

"So how come you hired me to find your wife if, after all is said and done, you don't really have one?"

He focused a very steady eye on me for a good solid moment, then he looked at the Veteran.

"Bertrand, would you and Tommy like to go to the kitchen for a little more breakfast?"

Bertrand looked at the floor. "Yes, Mr. Cascade."

"And would you mind asking someone in there to bring us some coffee in the den?"

Bertrand nodded, and he and Tommy took off. Lenny indicated the direction to the den, and I walked in ahead of him.

I sat in my previous location: the Queen Anne job. "So, Dad's sendin' you to Paris."

"I love it in the autumn."

"Uh-huh. I feel you have a story to tell me."

He took the other chair. We were very close. He stared into my eyes like he was trying to hypnotize me. It was like I'd never seen the guy before. His face, his hands, his hair, his clothes—everything was a little different. This was Lenny's big brother—who wasn't nuts at all.

Finally he sat back. "Well, yes, I am going to tell you a story. Why not? You can't do anything about it now. As you can see, the police are pretty much at my beck and call, wouldn't you say?"

"Those guys are really cops?"

"Oh, yes. You know, you wouldn't believe how terrible a policeman's salary is. They have to augment it with outside funds. And then, of course, when they get used to the outside funds, it's relatively easy to control them: One has only to threaten."

"Threaten?"

"Oh, to remove the outside funds, to ruin their credit, to report the bribe to their superiors. I've got quite a hold on them. It's really quite simple to do. I've done it many times before, in many cities. I can—and I say this with all due modesty—manipulate anybody's life beyond all recognition." He smiled—for a second, the old Lenny smile. "Money's wonderful."

"Yeah, but it's not everything."

"Of course not, but it can *accomplish* everything. With a very few words I could convince the police, for example, that *you* were a terri-

ble serial killer for whom they are currently searching. Clues would appear, witnesses would come forth, a case would mount. You'd be in prison before Christmas—probably on death row, if there is such a thing in this state."

"I see."

"I hope you do. For some reason I actually like you."

"The feeling used to be mutual."

"You didn't like me—you didn't know me. You knew my character." He shifted in his seat. "He *is* very charming, isn't he? I've grown to be very fond of that one."

"Dally really is on her way—and so is Tony and so is Augusta. The idea being that I found your missing wife, and you're going to pay up as per the letter from your father, and my case is closed."

He locked me in that eerie gaze again. "Really. Your case is closed? Can you assure me of that?"

"What do you mean?"

"After I tell you my story—and I'm going to do just that—you may want to do something more."

"I don't get it."

"I believe that once I've told you everything, you will have the impulse to cause me trouble. I can deal with the trouble, as I believe I've just indicated, but I wouldn't like to do it. I don't really want you to go to prison. And I don't want to miss my flight."

"I still don't get it."

"I never know whether you're, as they say, playing dumb or you really *are* just remarkably vague."

"Now you know how I'm beginning to feel about you."

He seemed actually enthusiastic. "That's why I'm going to tell you all about this situation. I think you'll really appreciate my acting skills, and I never get to talk about them with anyone because most people don't get to me before I move on—despite the obvious trail I always leave."

"You've done this sort of thing before?"

He nodded. "All over the world. It's not always Looney Lenny, but he's my favorite."

"Why?"

"That's just it. It's all part of the story I'm going to tell you. No one really appreciates my artistry the way I think you might."

Some older woman came in then with a big tray: coffee service, croissants, butter, condiments. Without a word she set it on the table in between us and left.

Lenny held out his hand. "Please, help yourself. Coffee really does make me go to sleep, so I only have it at bedtime. But I think I will have one of these delicious croissants. Marie just made them this morning, and the whole house smelled like a bakery." He shoveled one up. "I can't *wait* to get to the city. There's a little café on a corner near the Hôtel de Ville, right on the river . . ."

And he drifted off, thinking of Paris in autumn. I hated to rouse him from his reverie.

"So, Lenny—what's the story?"

He settled back in his chair, finished the last of his pastry with one huge bite, and began to talk with his mouth full.

"I'm something in the way of a secret agent. I've helped my father's company achieve trillions of dollars' worth of profit. And I'm very good. Not to mention it's great work. I'm an actor in the play in God's mind."

"Say it again."

"*Lila.* Hindu. It's the play in God's mind: life."

"Heard of it. But I've recently been told that a story's supposed to have a beginning and a middle and so on."

He loved that. He actually beamed. The old Lenny wasn't completely out of him yet. "I came to Atlanta not quite three years ago. My father had bought this house. I settled in, researched my part, and began to acquire a reputation, as they say, 'on the street' as Looney Lenny—I even started the name. You can't imagine how thrilling it is to play a character that's so lovable. I came home every night filled with joy."

"Lenny was great." Then I realized I'd said it like he was dead.

He shrugged. "It works. Anyway, I met all sorts, as you might imagine. Of course, you and Ms. Oglethorpe . . . and your ex-wife and Marsha at the Majestic and Kelly at the club—these were all standouts."

"I'd imagine this all was for something more than the thrill of street theater."

He sighed, coldly contented. "Oh, yes. Something considerably more."

I folded my arms in front of me. "Like, for instance, you haven't mentioned our friends at the Golden Potala yet."

He reached over and poured me a cup of coffee then. "You really don't want to miss out on this coffee, Flap. It may be the last time you ever get a chance to taste it."

He handed me the cup. I dropped a spoonful of raw sugar into the little cup and stirred like I was at a party.

Lenny watched the motion of the spoon like it was a strip show. Then he looked up at me. "Dalliance and Tony and Augusta—they're all really on their way here?"

I nodded.

He sat back. "I'd really hoped to leave without seeing Augusta again. I don't mind seeing Ms. Oglethorpe."

"And Tony might have a few things to say to you."

He waved his hand like Tony was a mosquito in his face for a second. We sat in silence. I looked around the room. All the little things that made the place personal were gone—packed up, I guess. The diary-looking book was gone, even the desk or whatever it had been sitting on.

I took a gulp of coffee. "We gonna wait till everybody gets here to finish the story?"

He squinted. "I don't want to bore you telling the same parts twice."

"I'm not bored."

"It'll only be a moment or two. Traffic at this hour isn't all that bad. And Dalliance lives . . . what? Five, eight blocks from here?"

"About that."

He shook his head. "Smell that. This wonderful coffee and the fresh croissants . . . what a sensation."

I took a whiff. Suddenly, like a whack in the back of the head, something else came very clear in my mind. I think it showed.

Lenny leaned forward, very concerned. "Flap? Are you all right? You look sick."

All I could say was, "Mint."

"I'm sorry?"

"Mint. That's the smell in Augusta's room, the familiar smell, here in Augusta's room the other night, that I couldn't put my finger on then." I looked at him. "It was mint."

He was confused. "Mint's a good smell too. Very fresh. It's probably in some potpourri the maid puts around."

I set my coffee cup down. "No. Cinnamon is in all the other rooms . . . cinnamon and vanilla. Augusta's room was the only one with mint."

He still didn't get it. "All right. Mint." He shook his head.

I sat back. "You can't contain mint. It runs."

"Flap? Is something wrong?"

I closed my eyes. "Yeah, something's wrong: You had to be at Ruby and Teeth's—in the backyard. It's where you somehow got the

mint all over you. It gets on your shoes and your pants cuffs—and more of your clothes if you roll around in it."

"Ruby and Teeth have mint in their yard? Isn't that interesting. But why couldn't I get mint anywhere? They don't have the only crop in town, do they?"

I shook my head. "No. But I'm not a big believer in meaningless coincidence."

He approved. "Ah. Well. As it happens you've guessed correctly. I have been over in their backyard, and I did roll around a bit. Still—I'm giving you that. You just guessed."

I tried to calm myself. I took another sip of coffee. "Why would it be in Augusta's room? And by the way, it's not a guess—it's an intuition."

"And the difference is . . ."

I looked into the coffee cup. "Ask Dally. She'll be here in a minute."

"Yes. Well."

There was an awkward silence, shattered by the loudest doorbell I'd ever heard.

Lenny grimaced. "Ah, more guests." He turned to me like an ice cube in a glass. "This is very exciting, isn't it?"

"I suppose in a sort of surreal way it is." But before I could elaborate, there was Dally in the doorway. She gave me a look that could scrape up linoleum. Right away she was hip to the strangeness of the new Lenny. Lovely Lenny.

"Ms. Oglethorpe, how fine it is to see you." He was enchanting.

She nodded. She shot me another glance and took a seat on the sofa.

I raised my eyebrows. "Coffee? It's Gold Coast Blend."

She squashed her eyes up. "Ah. Well . . . that'd be nice."

I poured. Lenny watched us like we were an electric train set on Christmas morning. "You two really are a pair."

Dally took the cup I handed her. The room was still a little dark. The light of the new day had not yet reached our little corner of the galaxy. I couldn't tell if her dress was red or burgundy.

She sipped. "I guess we're waiting for Augusta?"

I nodded.

Lenny nodded. "In a way, that would be quite a wait. The Augusta you're talking about—the wife of the poor little soul in the rich big house, 'Lenny'—that Augusta doesn't actually exist at all, does she?"

I set my coffee cup down. "The fact is, pal, I got no idea. I'm dri-

vin' on faith. But I'm saying you just finished doing something very weird in order to get a trade deal between some Red Chinese guys and Cascade Art Imports. It's for some kinda gewgaws in Tibet. Maybe it even involves the new Panchen Lama. How'm I doin' for a slow guy?"

Lenny really looked a little shocked. "You absolutely amaze me. I would *never* have guessed you capable of this sort of . . . what did you say? Intuition?" He lit up even further. "Or is it a case of some remarkable powers of perception? Are you actually a great detective after all? Wouldn't *that* be a surprise?"

Dally shook her head like she was trying to tell me to shut up. But you can't stop the river.

I sat forward. "You fed Augusta Donne some psychological poison and got her to think, just a little bit, you'd actually made her up. You also got her to think the sex in the X-ray room was her idea."

Dally was at sea. "Psychological poison?"

I spoke to her, but I kept my eyes locked on Lenny. "He got her to read something—snuck it into her charts at work, I think—that made her believe she had come up with certain ideas, or at least confused her good. She's got a problem—kinda big one."

Lenny squinted at me. "It's just like a detective movie: 'I guess you're all wondering why I've called you here; well, I'm about to reveal the murderer.' I wish it were midnight. That's a much better time for this sort of thing."

Dally set down her coffee cup on the table in front of us both. "Lenny, it's obvious you're not the guy we all thought you were. Whatever. Flap found your wife like you wanted him to. Why don't you just pay up and we'll be on our way?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid things have gone too far for that now. I need a much more . . . secure conclusion to my little business here."

I have to say the phrase *secure conclusion* left me feeling a little tense. I finally looked over at Dally. "He's got cops in the other room—cops that don't like me all that much. With very little effort Lenny could see us both rotting in jail."

He nodded. "Yeees, that's true. I wouldn't like to do it. Probably better just to have you both killed." He smiled sweetly. "Or one of you. Have one of you killed and the other one blamed for the murder. That would be good. Flap, you'd play the part of the insane serial killer, and Dalliance Oglethorpe would star as the maniac's final victim." He shifted in his seat again, thinking. "Then, Flap, you could write about all this from prison. It's too strange for anyone to believe—they'd think it was fiction—but you could get someone like Norman Mailer

or Walker Percy or some Hollywood starling to champion your cause, and you could live quite comfortably in some maximum containment facility." He lit up. "A place for the criminally insane! That would be too wonderful. Maybe I could even get Augusta a job as your caretaker—or our friend Horatio."

I filled Dally in. "Teeth's real name."

She blinked. "I'm sorry for him."

Lenny fidgeted. "Except he's in jail already, so things could work out that *he's* the insane killer. . . . Maybe it would be better just to go back to option *A*."

Dally was the first to say it. She picked up her coffee again and smiled very calmly. "Just kill us off." Then she sipped.

He nodded, concentrating on the tabletop. "Exactly." Then his concentration broke. "Well, we'll work out the details later. Now let's just have some fun."

I sat back. "Feel like answering some questions? Would that be fun?"

He nodded. "Always."

"Who is Augusta?"

He slowly leaned his head back until he was looking at the ceiling. He put his fingertips together, then brought his face straight at mine. "Augusta is a metaphor for our times. She's nothing in herself; she's what we can make of her, mostly through proper manipulation of words and media. Then these ideas become instantly assimilated, and she has the illusion they're her own. That's really the beast of mass culture, isn't it?"

I recognized this Lenny. The knowledgeable lecturer who was trying to tell me a few nights ago that when you were talking to Augusta you didn't hear her accent, you just saw her face: image over content—the mass-media problem. It was the same sort of problem Dally had tried to tell me about in her club when the authorship of "Mood Indigo" was in question: There's now more available knowledge out there than anybody could ever get ahold on, so everybody ends up looking a little stupid. You can't know everything, so you go for image over content. You end up seeing the character, not the actor playing the part. That was my immediate problem.

"Okay, so who's Lenny?"

"Lenny? He's my fondest creation."

"That's it?"

"I suppose that's it, yes. He's a character I like very much—and

everyone seems to be taken with him. Why wouldn't they be? He loves everything. He's not real."

"Okay, then—who are you?"

He closed his eyes, and you could almost hear the wheels turning in the machine he used for a brain. Then, suddenly, "I'm Proteus." He opened his eyes. "I can be anything I like."

That was it. It shouldn't have made me shiver, but it did. I never heard a colder voice, and I know morticians.

# 21

## *Morning's Light*

Lucky for us the doorbell rang again, and the spell was broken. This time Lenny got up more deliberately. "The final element." And then he gave us a knowing look and rattled off to the door.

There was a commotion, Augusta's voice a little more shrill than I'd heard it, Tony's a little more menacing, but we couldn't hear exactly what they were saying. When they all slipped into the den there was a big silence all over the place.

Augusta sat on the sofa beside Dally. Tony stood. Lenny went back to the chair at the top of the room—the king's chair, despite being named for a queen. He sat like a king and surveyed his domain.

"I think we're all here. I mean, if I were a stickler we'd have to get Horatio out of jail and fly Neena in from . . . Nevada?"

I volunteered. "New Mexico. Same thing. Too much sand."

Tony shook his head. "I think in New Mexico they got white sand."

Dally smiled. Augusta looked anxiously between all the other players, like she was afraid she'd say or do the wrong thing. Lenny wagged his head. "But we digress. I think enough of the principals are here to continue with the festivities, don't you, Flap?"

"Absolutely."

"So do you want to continue with your astonishing powers of intuition, or should I just blurt everything out?"

Tony shifted his weight and stared at me. "You said you knew everything, Flap."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry I gave you that impression. I can't know everything; but here's what I believe: Lenny Cascade killed three women and a drag queen in some very strange ways just to make a business deal go through. It would have been Augusta if she hadn't taken a powder when she did. And it might have been Neena if her red hair didn't come from a bottle." I turned to Lenny. "How'm I doin'?"

He shrugged. "Unbelievably well."

I turned back to Tony. "I don't know what's the deal with Ruby . . ."

And Lenny showed his teeth in something that was supposed to be a grin. The rest of us were quiet as the grave, staring at him. "That's quite a joke on me." He shifted. "It's hard to explain, but when I'm in character, I often lose myself in the role, and you can imagine that when I'm little Lenny, I can be a little dense. Teeth, as we call him, talked endlessly about the *gorgeous* Ruby; he even showed me a picture—very lovely indeed . . ."

I couldn't help myself. "Red hair like Lucille Ball."

He nodded. "And I never imagined, in my somewhat enfeebled state as Lenny, that Ruby was a man. I mean, when you meet Teeth in his work, the last thing you'd think about him was that he was gay. And after all, I'd only seen a photograph of Ruby. It was just a simple mistake." He shrugged.

All we could do was stare.

He went on. "Perhaps I should start now from the beginning." He sat back in his throne, assumed his pose as Lenny the Lecturer, and began his story.

"Taoism is perhaps the oldest religion on our planet. It's at the heart of all mystical religions still in the world today: Buddhism—even, I'd say, gnostic Christianity. It certainly seems to predate anything we know about. Essentially it's a prehistoric nature religion. At its best it believes in a force of the universe that works its way through everything, and the closer you can get to letting that force work in you, the happier you'll be. Alas, this beautiful notion at its worst has largely degenerated in places like China and Japan into some kind of mystical, magical *hooey,* wherein practitioners believe in all kinds of alchemy, supernatural powers, mind reading, fortune-telling, hocus-pocus. That's what a lot of people believe in today. In the *ancient* notion, the science of tantra seems to declare that our human body is the perfect instrument for the expression of these ideas. In the present

day it's all supposed to be something *magical.* Either way, the expression of it can take the form of the meditations of the lotus-legged mystic or the depraved sexual postures of the fiercest lovers. It gives one a quite remarkable power . . . to influence. Especially in the weak-minded and the vulnerable. It's got something to do with the spinal cord . . ."

Augusta, nearly in a trance, whispered her two cents. ". . . chakras . . ."

Lenny shrugged again, impatiently, ". . . or some such. At any rate there are literally millions of people who actually believe this sort of thing, and the power of these beliefs can rule their lives and all their dealings."

I chimed in. "All their *business* dealings."

"Exactly. Some people in Asian countries won't take a step out the door without consulting these powers, throwing the old *I Ching,* stumbling around some stupid magic ceremony. So my father thought it wise to study these things, and I did."

I was on a kind of roll. "Here's my guess: He got you to study all this starting about six years ago."

He looked around the room. "How does he do it, ladies and gentlemen? And all without a net. It's the Greatest Show on Earth."

I kept on. "Dad reads in the paper or hears about the Panchen Lama dying. The Panchen Lama is the last stronghold of the true Tibetan Buddhism left in the country since the Dalai Lama split in 1959 when the Red Chinese invaded. The Red Chinese want to rub out religion in general, being as how it is, among other things, the opiate of the masses. Dad gets an idea. What if he can link up with the Red Chinese? Do a trade deal for some of the booty that's sacked away in monasteries up there at the top of the world—"

But he interrupted me. "A little reverence there, Flap. We're talking about an astonishing array of work. Some tiny little pieces, some very beautiful large things. Taken all together, quite a bounty."

I couldn't stand it. "But what's all this got to do with killing these girls? Is it something . . . in order to put the muscle on . . . who? The Reds? The lower-echelon Tibetans? Somebody here in Atlanta?" I was treading water, but I had ideas.

It was Tony's turn to be impatient. "What the hell has all this got to do with my sister?"

Dally kept her eyes on Lenny. "He's getting to that, aren't you, Lenny? You're telling a story from the beginning. I admire that. Everything you've said so far, since I got here anyway, has been the preface."

He lowered his eyelids. "The *preface.* Yes. You're really a delightful woman, aren't you? So, to continue, I researched some of the magic rituals on the chance that it might do us some good, come in handy for something—and because it's really *fascinating* reading if you're interested in that sort of thing. Here's what I came up with: an ancient ritual—and I mean this one's really old now—that insures any business dealing will go smoothly *and* undetected by, oh, the law and . . . higher forces. It's really amazing, this childlike belief in *alakazam.* Luckily, it's not so difficult to do. First you have to find three redheaded women. Of course, in Tibet—or any Asian country, I'd imagine—that's something of a task, but here in the States it's like falling off a log. I mean, as the saying goes, you can't swing a dead cat around here without hitting at least one redhead."

Augusta seemed to be sinking fast. "That's a saying?"

Lenny ignored her. "So *anyway,* we picked Atlanta. First, it's got one of the larger Asian populations of any city in America; second, Dad already owned a house here for other business reasons and it's far away from Boston—the home field; and third, until just very recently Atlanta was the murder capital of the country, so who's going to notice two or three more dead women, especially from the . . . lower end of the spectrum—"

I had to stop him. "Why redheads, again?"

"Because they're rare, because it's the *Red* Chinese, because it's the color of blood . . . lots of reasons, take my word. It had to be redheads."

Augusta, more trancelike than ever, stared at Lenny. "Redheads are straw dogs. Not real. Not like us."

Dally looked to me for explanation. I obliged, thanks to Linda the waitress. "See, it's a sacrifice in Shinto. It's a little dog made out of straw to sacrifice for good luck. They mean nothing, although I'm told they used to use real dogs."

Dally blinked. "Nice."

I nodded. "Exactly my response."

He completely ignored us. "The really *great* part is how they're sacrificed in the ritual. That's the fun. Listen to this: They have to be strangled, for maximum effect, at some peak emotional moment."

I nodded slowly. "Like fear."

Lenny nodded.

Dally's turn. "Because?"

"It's all a part of this tantric energy nonsense."

I chimed in. "It had to be exactly *three* women because—"

But he wouldn't let me finish. It was his show now, and he was very excited. "Three is a magic number in *all* the religions. The Holy Trinity, for example?"

Tony looked like he very much wanted to sit down. "How can you believe all this?"

Lenny blew up laughing—it sounded like a chainsaw. "Believe it? God, of course I don't believe it. But the people in Tibet who needed to be convinced, whose help we needed—both Tibetan and Chinese, not to mention my sources here—they *did* believe it, that's the point. They wouldn't help us with our . . . importing at *all* without this mumbo jumbo. Throws a real scare into a gentle people when you're willing to sacrifice three live women. Three rare women. And millions of people around the world believe. Ruby believed. Augusta believes right now." He turned to her like Dracula. "Don't you, dear?"

She closed her eyes. "I . . . I don't know."

Tony took a couple of menacing steps toward our host. "Stop it, Lenny."

Before I could even see them move, Bertrand the Veteran and Tommy the Dope flew out of the shadows someplace in the room and had Tony on the floor and handcuffed twice.

Lenny stood. "Boys, boys . . . a little gentler. This is my *house*, after all—at least for a few more minutes. Please."

They hoisted Tony up and slung him out of the room like a giant sack of potatoes. Lenny looked at me.

"See, Flap: I can manipulate nearly anything. Please don't force another demonstration."

I sat back. "So did *those* two kill the girls?" But I was afraid I already knew the answer.

"Those two? They couldn't kill a rumor."

"So?"

"Well . . ." He sighed and settled back into his chair. "You're right, of course, about a great many things. I first tried to talk Neena into being interested in my little plan. I told her I could get her a huge sum of money. Then I threatened I'd tell *you* about her sexual involvement with Dr. Schlag—"

I had to butt in. "Like that would have made a difference to anybody."

Lenny agreed. "But in the second place, as you probably know, Neena's real hair is blond. As it happened I'd already gotten Teeth interested in tantric beliefs months before. It's amazing how easy it is to suggest something to someone and then make them believe it's their

own idea. I did it as an exercise, nothing more, but when he kept talking about what it had done for him and Ruby—and when he showed me a picture of her—I decided that Ruby would be my first step."

Dally cocked her head. "You got Ruby and Teeth into tantric sex?"

Lenny smiled. "It was easy."

I shifted. "He can manipulate anything—combination of money and kundalini."

He went on, smiling at me. "But before I could complete all my plans Teeth got fired. Naturally, it didn't take much to suggest to Augusta that she could get him a job with her brother."

I couldn't resist. "It was a perfect setup for you. It gave you access to the girls at the Tip Top *and* to Ruby, plus it set up Teeth as the obvious fall guy—or tossed suspicion on Tony, who had all the opportunity for the killings. Even *that* had me goin' for a minute."

He was proud of me. "You're so good. That was exactly my plan. I wouldn't have to kill Augusta after all, and in fact she'd be more corroboration for the phony story, extra linkage to Teeth, to Tony. It was perfect. I went to the Tip Top and, mirabile dictu: two girls in an act together, both redheads, and, as it turns out, both living together and in need of a little extra cash. It's as if I'd written the story myself."

Dally nodded. "Apparently a big motif with you."

Lenny raised his eyebrows. "So I spent some time at the club—in a masterly disguise, if I do say so myself."

Once again, memory spoke to me—and I answered out loud. "The blond wig and a fat suit. It's very well done."

He spoke to me very calmly. "I'm going to stop being amazed at your observations. I'm just going to assume you actually do know everything, despite what you've told us to the contrary."

"Go on."

"All right, eventually I did 'pick up' the two daughters of Lesbos. They needed the money. It was actually a little tricky with the fat suit."

Dally took in a deep breath. "I'm not sure I need to hear all this."

But he shook his head. "You're not going anywhere." He waved his hand oddly. "I'm telling a story."

She looked around, and there were Bertrand and Tommy again, lurking in the shadows by the door. She nodded slowly.

He went on. "Well, first, the problem was convincing them to be videotaped."

Dally's eyes widened. "Videotaped?"

I nodded slowly, remembering Uncle Tegu. "He had to have some-

thing to show his . . . collaborator—to make sure the ritual was followed exactly? Something like that?"

He shoved out his lower lip. "Correct." He let a moment of silence work its way into our ears. "But with the offer of more money—a lot more money, actually—they allowed me to tie them up as well as set up the camera. Then it was only a question of making the first one die as hideously as possible. Strangle a little, take a break. Had to stuff items of clothing in their mouths, of course, to keep things quiet. I whispered to them over and over again the terrible things that were going to happen to them. Waved a razor around. I made up the most hideous images you can possibly imagine." He looked around at us. "Perhaps, given the simpering nature of this little group, *more* than you can possibly imagine. I even accurately predicted for them their future: dead bodies stuffed in the trunk of a car. They were shrieking with terror through their gags. The cord went 'round the neck. The first one dead; the second was more frenzied than I would have thought possible. It made a very fine video." Then, like he was scolding a dog: "One of them actually managed to pull out a clump of my hair, my real hair."

Dally could barely find her voice. "A videotape?"

I hadn't noticed before that there was a clock ticking somewhere underneath one of the sheets that covered things. Now it seemed so loud it could have been an explosion.

"So I got the bodies out of the apartment, of course. Unfortunately I'd made a mess, and my own hair and bits of clothing were everywhere. So I just had everything pertinent—most of the furniture, the rugs, all of it—removed from the apartment and destroyed. Even sent the boys back a second time after you were on the case, Flap. Did you know?"

I shrugged. No point in prolonging this particular party with my own reminiscences.

He laughed out loud at me. It was one of the ugliest sounds I'd ever heard. I couldn't believe that a few minutes earlier I'd actually had the idea that this guy was *saner* than Looney Lenny.

"Anyway, I put the girls in the trunk and just went on about my business. I thought it would make a nice bit of backup for the video—show the tape, then display the stars."

I looked away, slowly getting the full picture. "The way you had to do with Uncle Tegu."

It was like he hadn't heard me. He was in another part of his story. "I took them with me to visit Ruby and Teeth the next week. I thought it would *really* put a thrill of terror into Ruby. After they've been dead

for a few days, dead bodies actually look quite terrifying. I set them up in the woods beside the camera, then I went in to get Ruby. The house was quiet. They were asleep. It was nothing to slip them both a little whiff of chloroform. They slept like logs. I hoisted Ruby out of bed and headed, in the darkness, toward the backyard where I could accomplish my task. Imagine my surprise when I pulled back his nightclothes and saw his masculine . . . works. I mean, he even slept in makeup. It was quite a joke on me. Of course, at the time I was pretty angry. I do have a temper. I try to control it, but it often gets the better of me, especially when I'm playing Lenny and I don't get much of a chance to express my anger in my daily life —as it were. At any rate, there was Ruby, obviously a man. I lost my temper. And it was precisely at that moment that Ruby began to wake up. Naturally I'd only given him enough chloroform to put him out until I could get him away from Teeth. He had to be awake for the terror part of the show. He was absolutely beside himself with fear. He saw the dead bodies right away, and started jabbering something about my being a demon. He started making funny noises and hissing at me. Then he backed away, started to trace a pentagram on the ground. I let him—even helped him once I saw what he was doing. It only increased the power of the moment. Did I happen to mention how persuasive this tantric power can be, especially if you believe as strongly as Ruby did? I had the impression he thought I was a nightmare come to life, not human at all. Of course, he was drugged and wrenched out of a sound sleep, so I suppose that could account for some of his confusion. By the way, does any one of you know what the *significance* of the pentagram is?"

I ventured. "Teeth said something about a seal that protected a guy from evil spirits?"

Lenny rolled his eyes. "No, I mean what was significant to *me.*"

Augusta could barely speak. "It's the sign for the anahata chakra, the place of love and devotion—also where the breath and lungs reside."

He looked at me. "She learns well when she learns, doesn't she? I decided to make it another clue: breath and lungs, love and devotion, *strangulation.* Too perfect. And I left clues like that all over town, as you've intimated before, on purpose. I'd always hoped something like this—your visit today—would happen. It never has until now. I'm very pleased."

I shook my head. "Why?"

Dally, once again, was the wiser. "He's an actor. He never gets to talk about his work, his genius . . ."

Lenny flashed his modest side. "Well, I don't know that *genius* is

the word, but if you insist. I love to talk about my acting, but I never get to do it with anyone who can really appreciate it. Not the way you all can."

Dally steeled her face. "So finish the story."

"I let Ruby draw the pentagram, as I was saying. I also thought it might throw the police off—and it did. You know they actually thought there were satanic rituals involved?"

I piped up. "Yeah, I got a big kick outta that one myself."

Lenny nodded. "Ruby was chanting some nonsense. He kept staring at the dead women. I told him what was going to happen to him. And once again it was too perfect. It would throw the police off any trail, this thoroughly bizarre murder. He actually fell into a kind of ecstatic fear-trance. It was thrilling."

Now it was Augusta's turn to try and talk, vacant-eyed. "It was real. You really are the demon."

Lenny was proud. "I really am."

I wanted the story to move along. "So there's Ruby, dead."

He obliged. "I started a little fire, to burn his clothes and get rid of the kind of microscopic evidence that police science seems so fond of these days."

I nodded, wanted to get away from Ruby and the pentagram—and the creepy feeling it was still giving me. "So what next?"

"Well, a quick check of the math will reveal I was still one girl short. And I was beginning to feel I had to dispose of the other two. I mean, they were decaying at a fairly rapid rate, and the fun of having them around to scare my third victim was far less interesting than it had been to me, so I took the car—"

Dally couldn't help herself. "That pretty Buick—"

I stopped her. "By the way, would it do me any good to figure out who that car's registered to?"

"Some fictitious or dead person. I don't know. That's easy to fix up when you've got friends in the police department. Officially speaking it was a completely invisible car. So I drove around for a while. Took the girls by for a visit to Uncle Tegu. Had quite the effect it needed—really gave the videotape power. Then I got the idea of taking them to the cinema. Do you know why? Do you know how they advertise that place in the paper?"

"I give."

"It says, *Tip top entertainment for the discerning adult,* I believe."

I was dry. "Another clue. So you drove the car to the 'art' house parking lot . . ."

Lenny nodded. ". . . across town. Left it. And just called up another car . . ."

My turn again. ". . . a Lincoln Town Car."

He smiled. "I wondered when you'd bring that up. But let's save that part of the story. We still have little Augusta to deal with. You can't imagine the time I had convincing her that her suspicions about me were something she'd read in a tabloid headline at the supermarket. *That* took some doing—and some proper administration of what we might call medicine."

She still couldn't quite convince herself. "It was real. That was real." And she couldn't stop shaking her head.

Dally moved a little closer to her, still looking at Lenny. "You gave her drugs?"

"Oh, yes. She didn't used to be nearly as odd as she is now, thanks to me. But something sent her off. She found something that revealed my truer self, as it were."

Dally swallowed. "Oh, my God. She found the videotape."

He nodded. "I felt safe here at home. I was careless. One evening when I was gone, she put it on. I didn't even know it was labeled *Evening News.* You know she's . . . how shall we say it? She's *delicate* where reading the paper is concerned, so she often taped the news broadcasts. Still, I don't think it would have meant as much to her. The fat suit is a fine disguise. She didn't recognize me. The only question was why there might be such a terrible tape in the house. I think it might have just gone under the rug, as they say, except for the fact that she found the fat suit."

Augusta rocked back and forth. "I found the fat suit. But then I didn't think it was real." Her eyes were hollow.

He shook his head, disgusted at her. "She was looking for something or other in one of my closets and came across it. Even in her condition she's capable of putting two and two together. I'd imagine it came as something of a shock. She took it out of my room and hid it behind some things in her own room. I didn't even know it was gone for a while." He looked at me. "I suppose you're quite proud of your mint-sniffing abilities in this particular regard. That's what you smelled. But do you remember my little airplane up in her room?"

I nodded slowly. "As a matter of fact." I was getting one of those ice-water feelings, and I didn't like it.

"It was a note from her. It described the video and the fat suit. She hadn't finished writing it. I suppose I'd come home and scared her. I believe she left home that moment, in the middle of her note. I didn't

even know it was there. That's why I ran upstairs when you were here. I'd never checked the room completely. I found the note seconds before you came in. Nothing else to do but play with it in plain sight." Sigh. "I hadn't really thought you'd ever even find my house, you understand—let alone come over and *investigate.*" He looked around the room. "I'd felt rather invincible in this place." He went on with his story. "I just thought you'd find Augusta for me . . . for obvious reasons. In fact I hired you precisely *because* I didn't think you were bright enough to uncover anything else but Augusta. I'd heard you had some luck at finding missing people. I never imagined you'd be the one to find all my little crumbs—I never thought you were bright enough." He smiled a stab of arctic wind. "At any rate, the note was something she'd been writing to Tony. *I know it sounds crazy, but I have it in my head that Lenny's a murderer.* Something like that—and it talked about her suspicions fairly lucidly. I mean, there were big revelations: the video, the suit. It would have caused me trouble. I had to dash upstairs. I grabbed it just in time. Luck—and the fact that I'm faster and brighter than most. Then, that night, I flew it in front of your face for five minutes. You never even knew."

"I've just recently come to think about it. And that's where all the mint smell came from; the fat suit you were wearing when you were wrestling with Ruby was in there somewhere too. So now I know just how *big* a dope I am."

"Too late. It's all long since ashes—the note, the suit, the videotape. But to return to our story, I had to find Augusta. Wouldn't do for her to go around at that critical moment accusing me, no matter how crazy anyone thought she was. It would have been very inconvenient. And I thought she would make an ideal third girl after all under the circumstances. So back to the fat suit and wig. It was thrilling to see you come into the Tip Top, Flap. I was over at the other end of the bar from the two high-school boys. I assumed you'd get Augusta and leave, so I waited in the parking lot. You'll remember it was raining, and a little dark. When the girl came out the back door, I thought she was Augusta. When I realized my mistake it was too late to run, so I came up with the most exciting plan yet. I asked her for what they call, in their common parlance, a 'date.' She, of course, accepted. And there we were, outside in the parking lot with you and Tony and Augusta only feet away. It was only seconds after she died that I heard you both come out the back door of the club. Now *that* was an adventure."

Like a dope, I finally got it. "So all along you really *were* leaving these little crumbs to follow. Like . . . even the ankle bracelets."

"That's right. I deliberately took them off the girls. One at Ruby's, one in the cinema parking lot. I thought the police might find them. I never suspected you would."

I shook my head. "I can see why. I'm pretty much of a sap."

He shrugged. "So, let me see, is there anything major I've left out?"

I folded my arms in front of me again. "Now's as good a time as any to talk about Linda's family."

He genuinely didn't know what I was talking about for a second. "Linda?"

"The people at the Golden Potala? Kind of the point of all this?"

"Oh!" Big surprise. "Who's Linda?"

I let it go. "A waitress there."

He shrugged. "Well, you've properly surmised that it was Tegu with whom I had set up my little importing scam, especially when the outcome of our trade agreement with the Chinese came into doubt."

Dally had to know. "Tegu?"

Lenny obliged. "The owner's brother."

I added. "Right . . . Tegu. And by the way, some might call it smuggling."

He ignored me.

I pressed. "Now, how exactly did you know about them, the Potalas?"

"I'd done my research. I love research. And of course, their lease is held by Davidson, Peters, and Conner, our Atlanta law firm."

Like a rock whacked me on the back of the head. "Oh. Of course."

He went right on. "I knew that the family in Tibet was slowly sending a fair number of items to the little man who had no American identity."

I guessed. "Also information from the law firm."

Nod. "It was perfect: a completely *free* source of Tibetan artifacts, if I could only handle things properly. And once the false Panchen Lama was in place, as our research also showed would happen, it made the family's necessity of getting religious artifacts out of the country even more urgent. It all fell into place perfectly. All I needed to do was place Tegu in mortal terror, threaten his . . . *invisibility* . . . and he'd give me anything I wanted. You can't imagine how profitable a thing like this would have been for Cascade Art Imports: no overhead, possibly no cost at all, and a steady flow of priceless relics from a dying culture. It's a phenomenal deal, you'd have to admit. And of course that's another one of the reasons I kept the girls in the trunk, as I've

mentioned. I showed them to little Tegu. Dead women with red hair decomposing in a trunk. I think he might have jumped out of his bones and back to his homeland, Red Menace or no. It certainly convinced him of . . . everything he believed."

Dally had to say something. "Does your father . . . know about all this?"

"Of course."

She went on in what I took to be disbelief. "And you did all this . . . just to make some *business* deal go down?"

Lenny looked back at her like it was the stupidest question he'd ever heard. "Haven't you been listening? I started this as a business deal, but it's obvious that I came to love my work." He squinted; fixed his gaze like the high beams on a semi. "You can't imagine how much fun it was."

I nodded grimly. "So when you saw me in the alley this morning . . ."

". . . I didn't know how much you knew already. I certainly didn't want you to see me. My blond wig and fat suit disguise are superb, but you might have recognized me. I thought better of confrontation in the daylight and just backed away . . . until I saw you wave. Then it occurred to me that you actually might have *already* recognized me. So I came home and accelerated my preparations to leave town, as you can see from the state of the house. I had no idea you'd rally such an impressive show here." He looked around at our happy crew. "This has all been quite a treat for me. I never get to gloat like this in such auspicious company." Graveyard smile.

Augusta looked at me then. I could tell she was pretty far gone. "I told you there was a demon after me." And then she looked at Lenny very strangely.

Lenny smiled directly at her, and it was filled with poison. "Teeth believes in the demon. Ruby *saw* the demon. I think the girls might have said they'd seen it too. And of course there's poor little Tegu. More coffee, anyone?"

I didn't see Augusta get up. I didn't really see her move. Just one minute she was sitting there, losing it on the sofa beside Dally—and the next minute she was up, stabbing Lenny in the chest with the knife from the coffee-table tray.

She had fallen forward on top of him, completely without sound, and was pushing the knife into his body with jerky little motions. For a second it looked like two kids playing around. Lenny didn't make a peep.

Then, from out of the shadows again, bad cops zoomed in on Augusta and had her back against the fireplace in zero time flat. Lenny stood up. Dally's mouth dropped open. I tried to think how I could bust Bertrand and Tommy at the same time and still keep from getting popped myself.

This was all over in about two seconds. Lenny was dabbing himself with one of the linen napkins from the coffee service and actually smiling bigger.

"How very thrilling." He held out the napkin. "Look. Blood."

Bertrand did *not* seem concerned, but he felt obligated to ask anyway, "Are you okay, Mr. Cascade?"

Lenny nodded. He was examining himself. "She cut my shoulder, but I believe she missed the . . . important items." He looked up and wandered over to her. "You tried to get me in the heart? Wouldn't you guess that's where I'd be *least* vulnerable?"

She wasn't struggling. In fact, except for her body, I don't think she was even in the room anymore. She was just kind of staring off.

Tommy shook her. He shook her really hard, like she was a big floppy doll. "Whata ya wanna do with her?"

Lenny took the knife from her and held it too close to her face. "Now, if you really wanted to do some damage, I'd think something in the throat or neck area . . ."

And with a move too quick to see, he shoved the knife deep into Tommy's throat. Blood shot out everywhere like a leaky old French fountain. He sliced a little, still with his eyes dead on Augusta's face, then brought the dripping blade back between their gazes. Tommy dropped to the floor, twitching and gurgling. Bertrand was grinding his teeth hard.

Lenny looked at him and spoke very softly. "Don't shake her the way Tommy did, all right, Bertrand?"

"All right."

"I didn't like that."

"I gathered."

"Augusta is in a very delicate condition."

"I can see that."

"We want to take her to a nice facility of some sort, I think. Not that GIMH. Let's find the most expensive private-care place in the state, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'd like it to seem like a bed-and-breakfast, maybe in the mountains. Do you think you could manage to do that?"

"Absolutely."

Lenny backed off. "Good. Take her now. And on your way out, dispose of her brother." He didn't even look back as they left the room.

Dally's pretty tough when it comes to it. "Say, Len, your boy's makin' a big mess on the floor over there."

Lenny shrugged and sat down again. "All right, I guess it's not really our house anymore." He sighed. I had to look really closely, but I swear to God I think there were tears in his eyes. "Flap, it truly *was* as if I'd written a list of my favorite things . . . she was everything perfect. She was the essence of the feminine. She actually was yin to my yang."

I let that go for the moment, but I had to ask about Tony. "Lenny, you're not really gonna ice Tony."

"Very colorful, Flap: *ice*. We'll see." Softer. "We'll see."

I nodded. What I was thinking was how tough it was going to be for somebody to actually get rid of a guy like Tony the Boulder. My money was on the good guys, but I had it in the back of my mind to make certain.

Lenny went on. "With you—you understand it's just business." He shifted in his seat, looked Dally square in the face. "I think you and Flap will not be much trouble, so at the moment I'm deciding to let you be."

Dally sat forward, shaking her head. "You think we won't be much trouble because we *can't* be. You think you've got it all sewn up. You got the free imports, you got the police, you got the dough. Who's gonna believe us? And if they do, evidence against Flap or me or both of us comes to light somehow, and we're nicely put away, or dead—or at least dead in the water."

"Exactly. Why bother with you if I don't have to? And I'm nearly late for my flight. I'll be in Paris before you have dinner."

I stood up. "Well, if I may speak for Ms. Oglethorpe as well as myself, we'll be leaving now. If you actually mean we can go."

Dally stood too. She could see I was just trying to get us out of there. Unanswered questions were the least of our worries. But she couldn't resist pushing it.

"So, Mr. Cascade, I believe Mr. Tucker actually completed his assignment for you. He found the woman in question. So . . . will you be settling up in cash or by personal check?" That's Dally—you've got to love her.

For a second he stared at her with the same face he used on Tommy just before he carved him up, then, completely out of the blue,

he busted out laughing: big belly laughs that he really meant down to his socks.

The older woman who had brought us the coffee came in the room while he was still chattering and, without looking anywhere, made her announcement.

"Your car is ready, Mr. Cascade."

Still full of chuckles, he got himself up. "Fine, fine. Listen, would you get someone to clean up this mess?" He indicated Tommy, who by now was all over the floor. "And would you please bring me my traveler's checks?"

"Of course, Mr. Cascade."

Still without looking at anything, she left.

Lenny took in a deep breath. "If we call on her, she'll say she saw you kill that policeman, Flap. Or she'll say you stabbed him, Ms. Oglethorpe. I think I could get her to say her son had done it . . . if she has a son. But now she's going to get you some money. A contract *is* a contract, after all, and you did fulfill your obligations." He eyed me with a look that could chop down a tree. "One way or another, everyone takes the money. That's something you and I understand, Flap. It's just business—and everybody in the business takes their money."

I shot a glance at Dally, but she shook her head. She had something else in mind *besides* the money, I could tell.

I moved toward her, took her arm, tried to edge her closer to the door. After Tommy, I wasn't going to trust a minute close to Lenny.

I wanted to keep his mind busy. "So, Len—what happens to Teeth?"

"Oh, Bertrand will work out all the details. Maybe he's another victim . . ."

". . . maybe he fingers me, maybe he kills Dally . . ."

"The sky really is the limit. I'd stay on my guard for a while, Flap. Evil is abroad in the land."

Dally was resisting my efforts to get her out the door and apparently her own better judgment against cracking wise. "I think evil's a guy, not a broad—and it's my personal belief that he's right here among us."

He didn't care. "I'll probably have a new name and a new family and a new life. I'm very rich, and I think my 'acting' career is finished. I think Lenny Cascade . . . is dead."

Her voice was low. "I'll buy that."

"Perhaps even killed by the awful demon that swallowed up innocent girls just recently . . . in the city too busy to hate."

The old dame brought in the traveler's checks, and two other guys I'd never seen before took Tommy away. Standing, Lenny wrote out five of the checks to me and handed them over. I barely glanced down. They were all ten-thousand-dollar checks. I never knew they made them that big. And the signature on them was something I couldn't even begin to read, but they were made out to me—even had my social security number on them. Nice touch for many reasons. For one it said, *I know everything about you and I keep it in my head.*

Some other people came to the entrance carrying luggage, lots of it. And Bertrand and Augusta and Tony were nowhere to be seen.

Did I ever mention I thought Dally had guts? She stuck out her hand and shook Lenny's like she was the hostess at a dinner party. "Thank you, Mr. Cascade. I hope you have a pleasant flight. Paris is wonderful at Christmas. Maybe you'll catch a mass at Notre Dame."

They were walking briskly together toward the door. I was following, still thinking that maybe somebody was going to jump out from somewhere and dice us with a butcher knife or pop us with a slug.

But we made it to the door. Out front the big gray Lincoln Town Car, parked right behind my crummy little auto. Dally had walked, I guess. Her apartment wasn't far—her car wasn't there. I hastened her along; skipped down the steps.

"I'll just get my heap outta the way, there, Len. Have a nice trip." And we were in my car without another word.

I cranked it, but this time I couldn't resist looking back, pillar of salt or no. Lenny was directing baggage; giving last-minute instructions to the housekeeping staff. Morning sun was up, slanted hard and clear like it does in late autumn. He didn't give us a second look. He'd forgotten all about us. He was already in Paris.

# 22

## *The Easy Life*

I spent the next couple of days over at Dally's. Neither of us wanted to be alone. The more we talked about the events of our day at Lenny's house, the less real they seemed. Still, we kept hearing killer-noises outside. And every knock on the door was the cops showing up to haul one of us in for murder.

We went to cash the traveler's checks. What Dally had decided when she'd been standing there in Lenny's house was that we could use them to track Lenny. We could follow him into what he supposed would be his anonymous life in France. After some pretty elaborate deciphering, the kid at American Express got us the name, all right: Edmond Dantès. I couldn't stop laughing.

Dally isn't quite as well-read in dashing fiction as I am—she's got a real job. She didn't get the reference.

"What? Is that a made-up name or something? What's the joke?"

"It's the Count of Monte Cristo."

"What?"

"Dantès. He was the guy who took on, like, a new identity and wreaked his revenge on the world because he got a huge treasure from some geezer he met in the joint. Edmond Dantès became the Count of Monte Cristo."

"So he beat us. Lenny got away."

The kid at the American Express counter was busy whispering to his supervisor about the size of the checks. I pulled Dally away.

"Maybe not. Lenny didn't bat an eye when you asked him for the money. I think he'd already planned on it. I think these checks are one more clue he dropped to get us further into his little play."

"No."

"Okay, but I'm checkin' a map anyway."

Sure enough, if you get a really detailed map of France, there it is, just a little north of Nice, right on the Italian border: the Mountain of Christ—not called *Monte Cristo,* but you get the idea. There was talk of using the money American Express was going to give us to go to France and find this mountain and get Lenny somehow. That was if they ever verified the checks, and the signature against the one of the person who had originally signed for the checks in the first place, and the amount of the payment, and about ten or twelve hundred other details. We were also talking about using it to get Teeth a really hot team of lawyers, maybe track down Tony, maybe even find Augusta—again.

Of course, no amount of badgering got us one dink into the door at Cascade Art Imports in Boston. Mr. Charles Cascade? He never heard of us and he was much too busy. And that letter he'd supposedly written Dally? Not even remotely his signature—probably Lenny's handwriting, if I had to guess.

So how about Davidson, Peters, and Conner? They never heard of Cascade Art Imports. No such client. Never had. Wasn't good enough for me. I had other ideas about them. I had to have a little chat with Mr. Davidson face to face. It took some doing, but in the end we just showed up at the offices and Dally's smile got us a pretty long way.

"Mr. Tucker . . . Ms. Oglethorpe . . . you realize that we have no connection with Cascade Art Imports whatsoever."

I nodded. "Then it won't be necessary for me to tell you that unless I hear from Tony and Augusta Donne within twenty-four hours, everything that's happened to us over the course of the past couple of days is going to find its way into every news broadcast, tabloid paper, billboard, and web site I can get to."

He tried to stay calm. "You have absolutely no proof of anything."

Dally leaned forward. "Oh, really? How about *two* eyewitnesses? How about files at the GIMH? How about anything we can scrape up off the floor over at One St. Dominic? Just for instance." Had to love her.

He consulted the top of his desk, cleared his throat, blinked. "I

can't tell you that Mr. Donne will call you . . . at your home? In, say, six hours? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Dally gave him the number.

I wasn't finished. "By the way, did I tell you I bought some stock in Cascade Art Imports? I'm very interested in their progress." I smiled. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

As we were leaving I was thinking of five or six good lawyer jokes I'd heard. The first one starts, "What's the difference between a dead weasel in a drainpipe and a lawyer?"

But sure enough, just after dinner that very night the phone rang.

"Flap?"

*"Tony?"*

"Can't talk. Everything's cool. An' I understand I have you and Dally to thank for my not bein' a stiff . . . at this juncture."

"Think nothing of it. Where are you?"

He lowered his voice. "No time. Me an' Aggie's gettin' out."

"Out?"

"Of the country. When it's all settled down you'll hear —promise."

And before I could get another word out, there was nothing but a buzz on the other end. I looked over at Dally.

She's always one for knowing when to throw in the towel. "Yeah, well . . . that's that."

And for a while we both thought so. Teeth was still in jail, pending further investigation, but it looked pretty much like the case against him was petering out, as they sometimes say. Especially since a new girl had been killed at the Tip Top when he was in custody. Aside from hating the city's food, he was doing okay. He'd be out by New Year's Eve.

Still, Dally put in a call to a pal of hers on the force—one for the home team. "Sil? Dally. Thought you'd like a kick, not that it's gonna do anybody any good. The two dancers in the car trunk in Buckhead? They were creamed by a guy used to hang out around the Majestic area. Called Looney Lenny. Yeah, that guy. I know. I know. But he skipped the country. I thought you'd be interested." Beat. "Naw. No proof whatsoever." Beat. "Right. Tell the wife that Dally says hey."

I stopped in at the Golden Potala one day. The place was kind of quiet. Linda was there; her father wasn't. She said he'd come down with something, but I got the impression he just needed a little rest. She thanked me over and over again for chasing away the demon-man. But when I ordered spring rolls they weren't on the house.

I asked her about Uncle Tegu. She told me he'd left town for

points unknown. I'm pretty sure she really didn't know where he'd gone, or why, or very much at all about the real truth of the matter. She seemed kind of sad. I didn't have the heart to tell her the whole story, especially about how her uncle had more or less ratted out her whole family. And I think I had in the back of my mind the happy thought that maybe, just by making Tegu think I'd chased away the shark car, I'd halted the flood of family heirlooms from Tibet, made things a little tougher in the importing game. And even though he'd gotten away with murder, maybe Lenny hadn't gotten away with the treasures of Buddha.

When I left I asked Linda if she'd give my regards to her father. She said she would, but I don't know if she did or not.

Then, a couple of days later over at Dally's for a late-night dinner, out of the blue, as they also say, this guy Paul called.

"Flap. Sorry it took so long. I called your place. Your machine said call you at this number. Where are you?"

"Paul? You got something?"

"Yeah, actually."

"So?"

"Bracelets belonged to the girls with the hair you gave me. No doubt."

"Yeah. I was pretty sure."

"But did you also know that there's gross stuff all over these things?"

"Gross stuff? Is that the scientific term?"

"Like blood and skin and goo and stuff."

"Goo?"

"Fluids."

"Gross."

"Like I said."

"From the girls?"

"Some. Some from a *guy.*"

I didn't mean to, but I dropped the phone.

"Dally! Come here!"

She was in the kitchen.

"What? I'm chopping onions."

*"Come in here."*

She appeared with a knife in her hand, shaking it at me.

"What?"

"This is Paul on the phone."

"Uh-huh."

"He's got goo."

"Sorry to hear it."

"No, you're not. It's very, *very* solid evidence that Lenny killed the girls."

She shoved the knife back on the counter in the kitchen and came over to the phone.

I picked up the receiver again. "Paul?"

"I'm deaf, Flap. What was that noise?"

"Sorry. I dropped the phone. Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. This was easy. It was all over. This must have been kind of a . . . messy scene. These things were out in the elements and cold and rain and all—and the stuff's still there. No doubt. Is it a big deal?"

Dally leaned over to the receiver. "I'll marry you anytime you say."

Paul hesitated. "Flap? Is that Dalliance? If it is, tell her a week from Sunday. I'll fly my folks in."

I looked at her. "He says Sunday, week."

She nodded.

I shifted the receiver to the other ear. "Paul? You gotta document all this to beat the band. We'll be over to pick it up, like, right now."

"Okay. Remember, though, you gotta have another sample from the *guy* for me to say who it is . . . and all."

My shoulders sank.

Dally saw the look on my face. "What?"

I told her. "Well, you know, we gotta have another sample of Lenny's to say that the goo comes from him."

She closed her eyes. "Tell Paul good-bye."

"Gotta go, Paul."

"Okay." He hung up.

Dally was already going for her coat. "We go *now*. We get to Lenny's house. There has to be *something* there."

I hung up. I'd have to say I was a little excited myself. "It doesn't take hardly anything. It could be any item of clothing . . ."

"Could be a Kleenex."

We were out the door and on our way before I could even put on my coat. It was a dark night, coming on Christmas, and the streets were deserted. Dally drove.

"Later than I thought."

"Dally, what if everything's gone?"

"What, like Brigadoon? Like the house and everything?"

"Yeah, I mean, what if everything's gone?"

"It won't be."

But it was. The house was empty and for sale. Not a stick of anything to be seen through the windows.

"I'll bet it's been cleaned within an inch of its life."

We could smell disinfectant even through the thick oak door.

She nodded. "So . . . that *really is* that."

The moon was high and her breath was silver like a ghost all around us in the night air. We spent a little while peeping in windows and looking around and generally acting suspicious, but we knew it was no good. There was nothing in the house to even remotely get the fiber evidence we needed to nail Lenny. The only thing we were likely to find there was some kind of a ghost or other. We knew it.

Finally I took her arm. "What would you say to a little something to drink right about now?"

"I'd say, 'Why aren't you a little bigger?' "

"Okay, I could use a big old drink my own self."

I drove this time. Easy was already closed, but Hal the bartender and a few regulars were still hanging on to the last few notes of the night. After hours it's quiet: Everything is a little like music.

We busted in the front door like refugees.

"Dally. Flap." Hal set us up.

"Hey, Hal."

"This is your last glass of the good stuff, bud. You better bring me one of those extra bottles you got stashed."

I sat. "Sad to say, I overestimated. It's all gone. This is, in fact, the final dram."

He was very sympathetic. "It's a sad moment for us all: the end of elegance and sophistication here in our little world."

Dally broke the mood. "Yeah, well, gimme a pigfoot and a bottle o' beer, barkeep, and keep 'em comin'."

Hal nodded calmly. " '*Pigfoot,*' that's a great song. I like Teresa Brewer's version best."

I shook my head. "Nobody beats Billie Holiday."

He raised his eyebrows and conked a beer down in front of Ms. Oglethorpe. She hoisted it.

"So, Flap—I'm guessing you're never gonna get paid. How're they ever gonna verify those checks? And it's a mean old world: The rich get richer and the poor get nothing. But congratulations anyway on finding what I asked you to."

Hal stood up straight. "Hey, good deal: You found Lenny's wife!" He thought for a second. "Lenny really had a wife. Is this a strange world or what?"

Dally took a slug of beer. "Oh . . . it's a strange world."

Then Hal reached up under the bar and brought out a dark bundle of something. "So if you guys see him, maybe you could give him back his little jacket and cap. Look. They're attached. He left it on the bar a month ago or more. I don't think he even remembers it's here. You know Lenny."

We just stared at it, blinking.

I couldn't believe it. "I'll get it over to Paul's first thing in the morning."

Finally Dally said, "Well, ya see how easy life is?"

"Yeah." I finished off the last of my Cantenac Brown '86. "But I happen to know evil is still abroad in the land."

She nodded and took another slug; looked down at the dark bundle of Lenny's clothes. "Well . . . maybe we can do a little something about that."

So, when all is said and done, what do you do if the phone rings in the middle of the night? Say it's 3:00 A.M.—could be a wrong number. But it could be your best friend, so maybe you should answer. Maybe they need help. And maybe you can do a little something about that. Otherwise it's a mean old world indeed, and it doesn't matter *what* your experience is, because your faith isn't worth a bum check.

# TOO EASY

For Heather Heath,
who looked out the window one fine spring day
and said, "Maybe it would be nice to go to the beach."

For Tracy Devine,
who stood in the snow in Rockefeller Center while
Fletcher and I smoked killer little cigars.

For Frances Kuffel,
who sat in a true Irish pub and
talked about Folly and Taj Mahal.

For S. J. Rozan,
who's cooler than any cold place.

And for the good old Thrower boys
for their story.

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# 1

## *Dinner and Drug Traffic*

What do you say to your dinner date when there's a gunshot out the window on a hot summer night?

"'Scuse me, sugar. How's your swordfish?"

You take a look out the window, down to the street. There's a guy with his arm jammed inside somebody's open car door. It's not the first time you've seen this ballet. He's grabbing the steering wheel, shoving it hard toward the curb so the guy in the car can't drive away. He's speaking very calmly for a man in his situation.

"You don't drive away without you give me my money, man—else I take my gun and shoot you and your little dog too."

The guy in the car sees the error of his ways. The car sputters to a halt. Money exchanges hands. You go back to your dinner. The world begins anew.

I don't have that many friends over—a lot of them don't like the neighborhood. Dalliance is the exception—to almost anything. Nobody in the world has a friend like she is to me. We grew up together, starting out down in south Georgia. On this particular evening, however, she found the disturbance in the street annoying.

"Why don't you move?"

"Where?"

"Some quieter place?"

I sat back down. "I always liked the beach."

She took a bite of the swordfish. I'd grilled it on the hibachi out the back window of the spare room. My place is just off Ponce de León, a grand old Atlanta street that we've all agreed to mispronounce. The building's only got four apartments in it. From one end to the other I've got a glassed-in sunroom; a living room where most of the furniture is junk—kind of hobo hip. I've got a fine stereo hidden away; a dining room with a fairly useless bay window—there's nothing to see but the drug traffic; a galley kitchen, although I don't think the apartment would float if it came to it; and two bedrooms. I use one for sleeping, and sometimes the spare room is an office. I have a profession: Flap Tucker, Lost and Found. Plus, it's a great place to barbecue.

Dally took a sip of the wine. It was the 1983 Château Simard—not as good as, say, an '86 Cantenac Brown, which is a wine I would personally pop my own mother for—but the Simard's a steal at twenty bucks a bottle.

She lifted her glass to me. "Try Savannah."

I popped an asparagus in half. "Hmm?"

"Savannah. Tybee Island. It's quiet."

"How am I going to afford a vacation?"

She polished off the wine and reared back in the chair. "Well, what if it's more like a working vacation?"

I should have known. "You got work for me."

She nodded. "You got a dessert for me?"

"Raspberry Surprise."

"I'll bite. What's the surprise?"

I stood up. "I couldn't find any raspberries so we *got* no dessert. Are you surprised?"

"You're not really much for the sweets, are you?"

I went for another bottle. "I don't see the point."

She went into the living room. "The point is, you get a little denouement. A meal is like a story, pal."

I brought in the new bottle. "I know your theories on the subject. I'd rather talk about this job you think you have for me."

"Oh, I don't *think* I have it—and you're gonna really want to go when I tell you."

"You said that the last time . . . and I still haven't gotten paid, by the way."

She hoisted the bottle out of my hand and gave it a gander. "You don't want for the finer things." She didn't want me talking about the "last time."

I knew what she was doing. She was just trying to get me up and out of the apartment. I'd have to admit I'd been a little sluggish since our last business: a rude little whack name of Lenny—who got away. I mean, we foiled his evil scheme to get rich selling off the sacred treasures of Tibet—but he got away. I hate loose ends. He killed people, I found him . . . and he still got away. I guess I'd have to admit to feeling pretty bad on that particular score.

I settled in across from her. I was in an overstuffed chair that used to belong to my grandmother, who helped to raise me—such as that raising was. She was just about as odd as you'd want to be. She used to get messages from the static between radio stations. Sometimes the message was for her to buy six boxes of Bon Ami cleaner; sometimes the message was for her to take off her clothes and run down the center lane. She also suffered from clinical depression. The sad fact was she wasn't all that unusual in my family. I had a cousin that they locked up and threw away the key, far as I knew. What I'm saying is that I'm the *sanest* one in the bunch—which will give a person the idea of just how much trouble there is in that bunch. My grandmother wasn't even the worst. Still, it was a good chair, and I figured the nut juju was just about gone: she'd been passed away for fifteen years.

I zipped a glance at my dinner companion, then stared into my glass, beaded bubbles winking at the rim. "What's the job?"

"The usual. All you gotta do is find something nobody else can find."

I took a sip. " 'Oh, how feeble is man's power that, if good fortune fall, he cannot add another hour, nor a lost hour recall.' "

"Huh?"

"John Donne."

She blinked. "Okay."

"When you're a layabout like me, you can invest a couple of hours now and again reading poetry . . ."

". . . looking for lines the dollies'll go for."

"Dollies?"

"You heard me. If *you've* got time for poetry, my guess is that it's makin' time for dollies."

I shook my head. "You are one sad setback for the feminist movement."

"Bite me."

"Gladly, but first tell me about the job."

"First tell me about the poetry."

"Brother Donne is trying to tell you that people want the good

times to stay—but they don't last. And once they're gone, you can't bring 'em back. I can't find a lost hour, and it's what most people want."

"Don't you get philosophical with me, mister. And I thought Donne was a metaphysical poet, not a pessimist."

I had to smile. She pretends not to know, but she knows. "What's the *job*?"

"You're eager."

"I'm out of cash."

She set her glass down on the table between us. "Two boys, twins, got in a little trouble in Tifton."

"You can't get into *big* trouble in Tifton."

"Be nice. I think I like these boys. Somebody else thinks they killed a banker down there, but they didn't. It was his wife. She's a siren."

I took a bigger sip. "I thought they mostly operated on the rocks wrecking the big boats."

"The boys think she made a sound in his ear that cracked open his skull."

I nodded. "Like a siren."

"Yeah."

"So who's nuttier, the boys or this . . . dolly?"

She smiled. "Hard to say. Do you want to hear more or not? You want me to tell you the story?"

"Do I get to go to the beach?"

"The boys *might* be somewhere on Tybee Island."

"Then I want to hear more." I leaned back in the chair.

Dalliance Oglethorpe—descendant of the founder of Georgia, and owner of Easy, my favorite nightclub in the city—is absolutely one for a story. In fact, she will not give you two cents for a job unless a story goes with it. She's incapable of saying, "Here's the job: Go find some twins." She has to tell you a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. What am I going to do? I love her, so I listen.

# 2

## *A Story*

Dally's story went as follows:

There was once a banker who lived in Tifton. He saw a spirit once out on the ocean, and he fell in love with her. She was dressed in white, her hair was gold, and her face was pale and sad. She sat in a golden boat. Night after night he went down and paced the shores and begged her to come onto land and marry him, but she never answered. Finally he called out to her with a promise that a lot of young men make:

"I'll never stop loving you and I'll always be kind."

At that the spirit vanished from the water. There was a musical sound on the rocks, and the woman stepped ashore, followed by servants carrying bags of gold and jewels, her dowry—she was very rich. They married, and were happy, until they went to the christening of a newborn, and the beautiful spirit began to cry.

Her husband was embarrassed. "Stop. Why are you crying?"

"The poor baby. It's entering into a world of great sorrow and sadness. When I think of all the suffering that lies ahead, I can't help but cry."

And in a fit of anger the man shoved her out the door.

She said, "That's once."

It was only six weeks later that the very same baby died, and the couple attended the funeral. Once again the husband was angered by his wife's behavior. She was laughing and singing.

"Hush. Why are you doing that? It's a funeral."

She couldn't help it. "The baby has left this world of sin and sorrow and escaped its misery, how can I be anything but happy?"

And again he reacted in anger, turning her arm.

She looked away. "That's twice."

They lived happily for a time longer, when they were invited to a wedding. Not just any wedding: The husband's boss was marrying a much younger woman. It was widely known she was marrying him for his money. And in the midst of the festivity the spirit burst into tears again.

Her husband was enraged. "What's the matter with you? It's the boss's wedding day."

She wept harder. "When I look at that couple, I know youth is wedded to age for a thing so paltry as gold. They can never be happy."

This time the man exploded, slapping her. "I can't believe you. Let's get out of here before anyone hears you."

But she was as quiet as a wave. "You've struck me for the third and final time."

And saying that, she whispered in his ear one magic word, and left the place so fast no one could follow. Some ran after her, but all they saw was her golden boat, far out on the ocean. All the banker's wealth—of money and of love—was gone forever. And the banker lay dead on the ground.

# 3

# *Beautiful, Georgia*

I leaned forward, reaching for the bottle. More wine was absolutely required. "That's your story?"

She let me pour for her too. "That's the way Peachy and Maytag tell it."

"That's the twins?"

She nodded.

I sat back. "How much of it is accurate?"

"All of it. Some bank exec at Tifton Home Loan—one Lowe Acree by name—met a woman when he went deep-sea fishing in Savannah. They got married, he beat her, she killed him, and took it on the lam back home. That's what the boys said before they took off after her."

I nodded. "So why didn't you just tell it to me that way?"

"Don't you go for the folktales?"

I shrugged.

She sipped. "Well, you better get a hold of some, or you'll never understand those boys. They're a little simple, see—and they love the fairy tales."

"Peachy and Maytag what?"

"Last name of Turner. And it's not actually in Tifton, it's on a farm outside the city limits of Beautiful."

"Say it again."

"Beautiful, Georgia."

"Am I going there or Savannah?"

"Better start around Tifton, that's where the murders took place."

"*Murders?* Plural?"

"Did I happen to mention some of the townsfolk thereabout think the boys killed the banker's wife too?"

"Nice. You don't believe they did."

She shook her head.

"How did you find out about this?"

"Got a friend that teaches at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College . . ."

". . . in Tifton, Georgia . . ."

She nodded. ". . . and she called."

"What's your friend teach?"

"Metaphysical poetry."

"Shut up."

Dalliance smiled. Whenever she did that, I practically *had* to do what she wanted. She leaned forward. "So, are you going to help me or not?"

"What am I looking for?"

Medium-sized grin. "Churchy la Femme."

"That character in the old *Pogo* cartoons?"

She shook her head. "That French phrase. *That's* the job."

I looked at her. "*Cherchez la femme?* I look for the girl?"

Big nod. "The girl leads you to the *twins*. That's who we really want. Mr. Turner is a *church* member with Sally . . ."

". . . your pal at the agricultural college . . ."

She nodded. ". . . who says he's the nicest man in five states, and *he* wants to hire us to find his boys."

I concentrated. "And you think they might be on Tybee Island."

"Or Savannah, or someplace in between. Mr. Turner's got to know for sure."

"Now it all comes out. And by the way, I thought there wasn't much money in farming these days."

"He's got no money."

That made me sit up straight. "So how does yours truly get paid?"

"Land."

"What?"

"Mr. Turner gives us five-hundred acres of timberland—all old pine. We sell the lumber to somebody, and keep the land to retire on.

One day Tifton'll just be a suburb of Atlanta, and we'll be in the catbird seat."

"Whatever that means. And isn't Tifton, like, three and a half, four hours south of here?"

"Uh-huh."

"So what year do you think it'll be a suburb?"

"Oh, not in our lifetime—but our children's children will have something to fall back on."

"Let them fall back on their own petard."

"You can sell your half."

"Done. Like to buy some nice land in south Georgia? It's real hot there, but they make up for it with all the mosquitoes."

"Gnats. And first you have to find the boys."

I settled back again. "First you have to tell me more about the deal."

"The Turner family used to grow tobacco, now it's mostly soybeans, a little feed corn, and cotton's making a comeback—or isn't that what you meant?" She helped herself to a little more wine. "The boys are . . . what are the kind that don't look alike."

"Fraternal?"

"Whatever. They love their daddy, and vice versa, but they're odd boys. Apparently they seem kind of simple when you first meet 'em. Then they'll say something amazing, and you fall in love."

"*You* fall in love. I'm strictly business."

"The whole family's cockeyed, really. They've got an Aunt Ida."

"What's an Aunt Ida?"

"She's a mute who takes care of the family, and communicates with clicks and whistles."

"Like a dolphin."

"By tapping a pencil on the table in her own little code."

"Delightful."

"Didn't you used to have a nutty grandma?"

I patted the arm of the chair I was in. "So?"

"I just thought you'd appreciate these guys. They're a little off, but they've got big old hearts in 'em. They just want to help this girl, who's the real item: seems to come from an old Southern family, big money, overwhelmingly winsome."

"In what way."

"She thinks she's a fish."

"Say what?"

Dally nodded. "She thinks she's a mermaid, a silky, a creature of the sea."

"Get *way* out of here with that."

She leaned forward. "She actually thinks she'll die if she's not near the ocean or something. And I'd take her seriously if I were you. The last guy that made fun of her was her husband."

"Yeah." I slumped down in grandma's chair. "The *last* thing I need is to have somebody whisper a magic word in my ear."

"Right, so . . ."

"Where do I start?"

"Go talk to the dad in Beautiful . . . and Ida if you can. Check out the scene in Tifton; follow the trail to Savannah, if that's where it goes."

"I thought you said Tybee Island, and I don't know if my car'll make it. Do you know what that drive is like?"

"So borrow mine."

"Like that's any better. I'll get a tune-up." I polished off my wine. "What do I live on until I'm a timber baron?"

"Mr. Turner took out a loan against part of the land. You got expenses."

"Happy days are here again."

She stood up. "You need your rest if you're driving to south Georgia tomorrow."

"I hate that drive."

She nodded, took a peep out the window. "What was all the hubbub down there?"

"The gunshot? That's our local pharmaceutical distributor. He waits on the corner and customers drive by. They hand him money, he gives them what they want, and all's right with the world. Only sometimes they want to drive away without paying. Then he has to explain it to them. Once he shot a guy's tires out."

She closed the blinds. "Call the cops."

"You don't believe in the small business man."

"I just don't want you to catch a stray slug. You got too much lead in your system as it is."

I hoisted myself up from the comfortable chair. "Is that your ever-so-subtle way of telling me I'm lazy?"

"You're the one who said you have time to sit around idly improving your mind. Which I agree could stand the renovation."

I started clearing the dishes. "Look: I call the cops on this guy, he gets the idea I'm the type who likes to do something about it—which

we would agree is a false impression. Then he's going to want me to do something with *him*, and I don't even like the guy that much. Live and let live, that's my motto—one of them. Besides, the police're busy chasing the hookers off the street—much easier to hassle, plus *they* don't have guns."

"Flap, you've got a cynical streak through you that, frankly . . . I find enormously attractive."

"Uh-huh."

She held up her hands. "I'm gone. The swordfish was happening. Had a nice smoky flavor."

"You get twigs out of the yard and soak them for twenty minutes, then flop them on the charcoals."

She headed for the door. "Yard twigs. I'll alert the chef at Cassis." She stood in the doorway for a second. "You're going out of town for a while. I just realized."

I nodded, but I didn't look at her. "*Has* been a while since we were apart like that."

"I don't like it."

I had to look. The light from the hall knocked a halo on her head like a window in church.

"You should stand in a doorway like that more often, Dally. The light's doing you a pretty big favor."

She looked down. "Yeah. I'll miss you, too, Flap."

She checked out. The door closed. It was a little darker in the apartment.

# 4

## *Flat*

Too early the next morning I found myself out the door and in the street. The sun wasn't quite up, and our curbside entrepreneur from last night was still standing under his streetlamp when it blinked off: the city's equivalent to the rooster.

I waved. "Hey, Horace. Try to keep it down, will you? All the commotion last night scared off my dinner date—and you know I don't have that many."

He looked up. I could see he was tired: long hard night. "Jeez, sorry, Flap. I had a unruly customer. I had to throw a scare into him. You understand."

"Still."

He smiled. "I got more customers than you got dates . . ."

"Lots."

". . . so next time I'll threaten his life with a little more finesse."

I nodded once. "Just quieter would do."

"You got it, brother."

I started to slip into the car, but an idea began to steal into my skull. "Hey, Horace."

He was shuffling his money and was headed for bed. "Uh-huh."

"You sell much weed these days?"

"Some."

"Where's it come from?"

"Flap, you know that's doctor-patient confidential."

"No, I don't mean *who,* I mean *where*. Used to be a truck crop down south when I was a youth."

He was wise. "Oh, yeah. The particular weed of which you speak is still the main cash crop of the wilder boys in our fair state." He closed his eyes. "Sunny south Georgia. It's homegrown, brother—plus: It's organic."

"Skip the sales pitch, Horace, I'm not looking to buy. Just curious."

"You reminisce."

"Occasionally."

He shook his head. "The stuff these kids want today, it's just like takin' a ballpeen hammer and whackin' yourself in the forehead. Not like when you an' me was young."

"What's the big seller these days?"

"Got a new package called Homicide—horse and coke and seasick medicine. Makes you mad as a snake and twice as poisonous."

"Charming. Guess that comes from New York or someplace."

He shook his head. "Lot of it comes from right here in Georgia. Down south."

I shook my head; jabbed the key into the car door. "Look, I may be gone for a while."

He understood. "I see anybody goin' for your stuff, I call the cops." He split a pretty big grin. "I know 'em all."

I didn't doubt it. I'd been seeing Horace on these same streets since 1972. I don't even know what made me try to draw him out that morning, exactly, except sometimes you get an intuition. I nodded, tossed the door open, and shoved myself into the seat. It only took seven cranks and the engine turned over, and by then Horace had vanished. I headed for a grease monkey.

It was well after sunrise on Sunday morning, but I was sole proprietor of the streets. Heading for 75 South, there was a twenty-four-hour BP station close to the overpass on Tenth Street. Alas, no mechanic. It was self-serve. I gassed up, changed the oil myself, kicked the tires, cleaned the windows, and checked the plugs. I knew one of them was bad, but I didn't want to take up any more time to change it then. I just bought a new one and tossed it on the front seat beside me.

I pulled out of the station at eight-oh-five in the A.M. On that same spot had once stood a nightclub called 12th Gate. When I was a callow

something-or-other, I played in a little band there. We were the opening act for Elvin Jones and I was too stupid to know what a big deal that was. Now it was a self-serve BP station, and I had no idea where Elvin Jones was. But, I reminisce.

The endless drive down I-75 South has always been notorious across the United States as the most boring ride in all fifty. Plus, it's hard to drive when you're anxious about the state of your automobile, because there are long stretches of nothing but nothing. I started out with a Coltrane tape in the stereo, but you can only listen to *Giant Steps* about fifty times in a row before you need a change. I was just past Macon, a third of the way, so I twisted the dial on the radio, found what seemed to be the All–Hank Williams Station. It was diverting, but the scenery was still monotonous: it's flat.

Unfortunately my right rear tire was flatter. Just around Cordele I popped a tread. For a major thoroughfare the highway looked a lot like an empty parking lot. I could hear the locusts in the high grass by the side of the road. It was only ten-thirty in the morning, and already over 90 degrees.

It took a little longer to change the flat than it should have, seemed like the nuts were welded on. I figured as long as I was pulled over anyway, I'd change the spark plug, so I popped the hood and went to work. What with the grease and the oil and the heat and all, I was a fine mess when the job was done. And in a dandy mood.

I was just about to close up auto shop when a pickup came into view. I was wiping my hands with a rag when they pulled in behind me.

Two big old boys jumped out, baseball caps and blue jeans. The driver was talkative, jumpy; had the sniffles.

"Need help, mister?"

I shook my head. "Naw. Had a flat. It's fixed."

The other one looked pretty dumb, smiling with his mouth open at the open front of my car. "You ain't got no flat up under 'at hood, bud."

I smiled back. I'm a friendly sort. "Decided to change a plug as long as I was stopped."

The driver crossed his arms. "Welp," sniff, "how about helpin' us out now? We short on cash."

I tossed the rag onto the front seat and put my fist on the door handle. "Can't help you there, boys." I snapped open the door and stepped behind it so it was between me and Bubba.

"That ain't nice. We stop to give you a hand, and you ain't got nothin' for us?"

I raised my eyebrows. "I didn't say that. I just don't have that much cash on me. I'm on my way down to Tifton for a job. Maybe you could catch me on the way back home."

He was edgy. "We can't wait."

He lumbered a step or two forward, and reached out for me with his log-sized forearm, but he was slow and I slammed his arm hard in the car door between us. Then while he was doubled over holding on to it, I bent down and picked up his right foot. The rest of him went down backward like a full sack of feed—it's some kind of law of physics.

His pal didn't move; just stared at the lump on the ground for a minute and then back at me, smiling bigger.

"Tifton, huh? I got kin down yonder. Or in Beautiful, rather."

I reached over to help Bubba up.

He got to his feet, dazed and confused. "I think you broke my arm."

I stepped back from him. "It was probably the car door that did it."

He was still looking down. "I think your car door broke my arm."

His pal actually laughed. "It's you own fault, you moron. What'n this world you wanna hassle some old dude on Sunday morning for?"

This seemed to embarrass the driver of the pickup. "Yeah. It's my own fault." He looked up at me. He was just a kid. "Sorry, mister. I didn't mean nothin' by it. I jus' . . . I got money problems."

I shook my head. "Let me see your arm."

He held out his hand like a dog, and I felt it all along the wrist to the elbow. "It's the ligaments and muscles got hurt. I don't think the bone's broken, but it's going to hurt for a pretty good while. You got a job?"

"Construction."

"Take a week off."

He took his hand back. "I can't, mister. I got a little baby on the way, and we don't got the money for hospital."

His friend offered up more sad evidence. "He ain't got no insurance."

Bubba shook his head. "That dang baby stuff—it's gonna cost a whole lotta money."

I eyeballed him, then leaned into the car, reached over to the glove box; pulled a card. "You boys know where the farmers' market is just south of Atlanta?"

Bubba took the card. "Sure. We take mushmelons up 'ere two, three times a year."

I pointed to the card. "Get your wife up to Dr. Thompson, close to there in College Park. It's a free clinic if you take your last tax return to prove you got no money."

He stared at the card. "It's that easy?"

"Yup."

He was suspicious. "Why you doin' this?"

"You need help."

He looked down. "Lord, I sure do. You a doctor?"

I shrugged. "Nope. I just lived in Atlanta a good while now, and I know lots of people. I did this guy a favor once."

The boy looked at me like I was a minister. "Well, you're doin' me a favor now. I don't understand it, but I ain't gonna forget it. What's the name?"

"Flap Tucker."

"Pevus Arnold." He held out his hand to shake before he realized how much it would hurt and took it back.

His friend was laughing again, but he was laughing at me. "You ain't gonna believe this, but my kin down in Beautiful? Is all Tuckers. It's my wife's side. You look up old Rusty Tucker down 'atta way—he set you up with some fine barbecue. Tell him Ronnie Tibadeau said 'hey.' "

I shoved out my lower lip. "I could use some fine barbecue, at that."

"He's the man to see."

I moved to get in the car, and Pevus backed away. He looked over at his consultant. "You drive." Then at me again. "I ain't gonna forget this, Mr. Tucker. I'm takin' the wife up tomorrow. She six months in and ain't never seen a doctor."

I settled in and slammed the door. Their power pickup roared past me before I could even get cranked. They waved like we'd just been at a picnic together.

# 5

# *Snow in Summer*

I stopped at the next filling station for more gas, poured down some more oil, and cleaned myself up best I could. I shot a quarter in the phone and rang up Dally collect.

"Hey."

"Flap? Where are you?"

"Nowhere. I just met some boys on the road—an encounter that I am hoping was not a harbinger of things to come."

"What?"

"I was detained by some hick highwaymen."

I could hear her shift the phone to her other ear. I think I'd gotten her out of bed. "You okay?"

"Thanks. I'm fine, but I had to slam a door on a kid's arm."

She yawned. "Well, it's all a part of the show."

"How do you mean?"

"The bold highwayman—it's part of the road thing. Didn't you ever read, like, *Barry Lyndon*?"

"Saw the movie. It was boring."

"Except for the Chieftains' soundtrack."

"Well, yeah—the Chieftains, they're great."

She spoke up. "Well, as you're always mouthin' off to me, there's no such thing as a chance encounter, you know."

"I know."

"So those boys, they've got something to do with something."

I gave her a little laugh. "Nicely put—and you don't have to tell *me* about my Tao. I know all about my Tao, sister."

*"Sister?"*

"You heard me. Those boys are not at my center. They've got nothing to say to me except maybe where's some good barbecue."

"That's valuable."

"I agree. But it's not germane."

She yawned. I guess I did wake her up. "Well, you never can tell. Just get back on the road. What'd you call me for?"

"To share my experience."

She wasn't going for it. "Uh-huh."

"Okay, the drive is giving me too much time to think. I want you to check on something. See does Tifton Home Loan—that's where you said this Lowe Acree guy worked, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"So, see do they have any affiliation with any other bank or savings and loan in Savannah. Maybe you could call like you're going to open an account, but your family's in Savannah or something and you want . . . I don't know. You say whatever."

"I get it—what's your idea?"

I leaned up against the phone. "No idea. I'm just . . . Quasimodo."

"You got a hunch."

"Yup."

"Terrible joke."

"'Bye, Dally."

"Take care, Flap."

We hung up. Back in the car and headed south; the land got even flatter and hotter. I was between radio stations. It was a long, lonely stretch of road with miles of white on either side. I was going backward in time. It was cotton, lots of it. The boll weevil is a thing of the past—about the only thing that can mess up a good crop now is too much weather. Cotton, when it's close to ready, makes a hot summer field look like snow. So there it was: the snow in summer, the first sign that something was strange. If I'd known then just how much stranger things were going to get, I might have made a U and skittled back home where I belonged.

# 6

# *Gold*

I drove on through to Beautiful, just followed the signs. I wanted to get a talk with Mr. Turner. Sunday morning, I was told, they'd all be in church. I rolled into the only populated place in town, the Kingdom Baptist. Looked to me like services had just finished—they go on for a long time in the old primitive Baptist tradition.

I wasn't even out of the car before some good soul had my number. "You here for the dinner on the grounds?"

I cranked myself up from the driver's seat. "Uh-huh." Stuck my hand out to shake hers. "Flap Tucker."

She found herself delighted. "You're a Tucker."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Atlanta?"

"It's obvious?"

"Saw your plates."

"Oh."

She took my arm. "I'm a Lee by marriage, but some of us have married Tuckers."

"Should I start apologizing now?"

She slapped my arm. "Oh, they're all good boys in one way or another. I'm Alma."

"Alma. That means 'soul' in Latin."

"Spanish."

"Okay."

She shrugged, dragging me around the building to the yard out back. There were dozens of picnic tables, all laid out with dinner finery, and a crowd of hungry Christians.

She pointed. "There's the Tuckers. They'll be so glad to see you."

"They won't know me. I'm distant."

We'd moved to Atlanta when I was eight. Dally's dad and mine were both looking for better work in the city. I'm not sure they found it. My memories of growing up in this part of Georgia were very slack. I remembered having cousins—one in particular that I played with even before I knew Dally. But she'd gone away. I had no idea where she'd be these days. I didn't even think I'd recognize any of them, or that they'd recognize me. I couldn't really say whether it affected me one way or the other. I really try not to be that big on the family unit, really. Given my family, I thought anyone could follow my reasoning.

I looked at Alma and told her again. "I'm a *distant* type of a relative."

She slapped my arm again. "It's *family*." She squeezed my hand. "They don't treat you right, you come on over to our table."

I looked over the crowd. "Which one's Sally?"

"Gates or Arnold?"

"The one works at the college in Tifton."

"Arnold." She cast an eye about, then pointed. Sally was a fine plump woman sitting beside some of the tastiest-looking fried chicken I'd ever seen.

I angled in that direction. "Look at the sun on that chicken."

She agreed. "Just like a basket of gold."

Sally saw me coming. "You must be Flap."

"I must be."

"Sally."

"Hey."

She stood up. "We've got a lots of Tuckers here today. Reckon any of 'em's kin?"

"Don't think so, but I wouldn't know it if they were. I'm not much on the family thing."

"Oh, it's real big here."

I looked around at the crowd. "I can see that."

"Doesn't mean much to you?"

I couldn't take my eyes off that fried chicken. "You're going to be whoever it is you're going to be no matter who your parents were."

She smiled. It was winning. "*Que sera, sera.*"

"In the words of that great American philosopher, Doris Day."

She was very serious. "Oh, Doris Day's great."

"May we sit?"

"If you think you could eat a bite or two of that chicken you're starin' at, we could sit right here and have us some dinner."

"If it tastes half as good as it looks, I may move down here for good."

She liked that. We sat down and she loaded up a paper plate. Fried chicken, cutoff corn, black-eyed peas, green beans, fried okra, and boiled squash. I reached for the corn bread myself.

"By the way, Sally, you don't have a boy name of Pevus, do you?"

She clucked. "That boy needs to find his path. He's my nephew on my husband's side. You didn't meet him on the road?"

"Well . . ."

She reached over for her purse. "Lord. How much did he get?"

I took a bite of chicken. "I just gave him some advice is all."

"You didn't give 'im money?"

"Nope."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd hate for you to start off this business thinking bad things about us. Mr. Turner really needs some help."

"It's okay, Sally. So, where is Mr. Turner?"

"Oh, he left after service. He's not much of a socialist since his wife died. He'll be to home, I expect."

"Socialist?" I had to ask.

"He don't socialize at these dinners like he used to. Just comes to church meetin' and then goes on home."

I smiled. "Not much of a socialist."

"Uh-huh, and he's so nice when you get to know him. It's a shame about all this with the boys and all."

"He'll be home all afternoon?"

She nodded. "Their place is close to here."

"Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Eat first, meet a couple Tuckers." She shrugged. "Might be kin."

I nodded. "I'm told Rusty's the one to see for barbecue."

She lowered her voice. "And liquor."

"This is a dry county."

"Oh, yes." She sounded relieved.

"So which one is he?"

She searched her eyes through the gathering, and fixed on one spot, then raised her eyebrows. It's not polite to point.

I saw a happy fat guy talking loud to his cohorts. If we hadn't been

at a church gathering in a dry county, I'd have said he was already in his cups.

I took a bite of the chicken leg. "Where's he get his drink?"

She looked down. "Buys some wholesale, makes his own wine—they say it's real good."

"Just wine?"

She thought I was telling a good joke. "You're thinkin' of the mountains, hon. We don't have stills in this part of the country. Everything's so darn flat, we've got no place to hide one."

Arm slapping must be a big thing in a dry county. She whopped my shoulder good.

I was making heavy progress on the meal, but I kept my place in the conversation just the same. "So, Sally—what is it you teach at the college?"

"Poultry science mostly."

"Chickens."

"Well, you've got to factor in your emu and your ostrich nowadays."

"Your *what*?"

"Ostrich." She nodded with confidence. "It's the red meat of the future."

"Really?"

She was vigorous. "Just like a beefsteak with none of the bad fat; some places it sells for twenty dollars an ounce. And you can get a whole lot of meat off one big ostrich."

I tried not to get a mental image. "How'd you and Dally meet?"

She got dreamy. "Dally and Sally—we were interested in the same boy first year of college—when you were off in the service."

"You aren't the one that married that Charlie guy? Was he Charlie Arnold?" Dally'd gone to Wesleyan for a while, and got stuck on a Charlie.

Sally couldn't hide her pride. "You bet."

"So you beat Dally out of the boyfriend."

She settled into her chair, smiling. "Maybe."

"Well, you did or you didn't."

Her voice was softer again, and she wouldn't look at me. "I always got the impression Dally was waitin' for *you* and gave up on Charlie. She didn't hardly talk about anybody else."

"I'm the best friend Dally's got—which'll give you a little idea the kind of *trouble* her life might be in—but that's *it* between us. And I think you won Charlie with this *food*."

Again with the arm slap. "Stop."

"You got Charlie fair and square." I wiped my mouth with the paper napkin. "I'm telling you, it probably had something to do with this chicken, or the cutoff corn."

"I'm proud of that corn. You get a big old boiler; take it out in the garden, like on a long extension cord? That corn won't leave the stalk till it's in the salty water."

"How do you mean?"

"It's very fresh. You bend the stalk into the boiling water before you even snap off the ear."

I shoved the plate away from me. "Well, it's worth the trouble. I'd marry you for that corn—if you'd have me."

She didn't look at me. She was already thinking about our business. "Okay. Thanks for comin' down to help Mr. Turner. He's a real good man, and he was always nice to us kids growin' up. Once you find the twins, I think you'll see why everybody loves 'em."

"Yes, ma'am." I surveyed my empty plate. "I think I'm going to talk to Rusty for a bit, then I'm going over to the Turner place. Which way?"

She still didn't point. Manners count at church. "You go left out the drive, ride five, six miles out, and catch another left, it's the first big blacktop intersection. Go on down another three miles or so, and their place ought to be on the right. If it's not, you're lost."

"What do I do then?"

"Wave at somebody and ask 'em."

"Wave."

She was serious again. "Oh, you got to wave at folks around here."

"How come?"

"This is a friendly community, Mr. Tucker. If you don't wave, somebody might get the idea you're not as friendly as you need to be, and they take a gun and shoot you."

I stood. "Well, I don't want that."

"No, sir." She stood with me; shook my hand. "Thanks one more time for helpin'. You let me know what's goin' on, now."

"I'll call Dally; she'll call you."

She patted my back. No slapping now. "Good enough. You take care, hon."

I took a last look at that fried chicken. The basket was nearly empty, but all around it there was still a golden light. Maybe the gold wasn't in the food. Maybe it was in Sally Arnold after all.

# 7

## *Barbecue*

I launched myself off to the loud group of men that had gathered around Rusty Tucker. Then I waved.

They all waved back, some of them even smiled. I fixed a very friendly gaze on Mr. Tucker, the Barbecue King.

"Hey. Name's Flap Tucker."

He was delighted. "Hey, bud—sit on down. We ain't met?"

"No, sir. I live up in Atlanta -have for a good while; not that much in touch with the Tuckers hereabouts."

He nodded. "Happens."

"But on the way down I met an in-law of yours. Ronnie Tibadeau."

He rolled his whole big head. "Oh, Lord. You musta had a flat comin' down here, or some kinda breakdown."

I smiled. "What makes you say that?"

"Onliest way a stranger knows Ronnie, or that Pevus Arnold, is they got 'helped' on the roadside. How much they get?" He stood, reaching for his wallet.

I held up my hand. "No, sir, Mr. Tucker. Nothing like that. They just needed an obstetrician."

He had no idea what I was talking about. He blinked once and said, again, "How much?"

"Ronnie just told me you were the man to see about some barbecue."

Everybody in the crowd was relieved. Mr. Tucker sat down. "Oh. Barbecue."

He was cautious. "Well, I surely can fix you up. I guess Ronnie wouldna told you 'bout the barbecue if he didn't think you was okay. How much you need, brother? I got it by the gallon or by the fifth."

A fifth of barbecue didn't seem like a colloquialism. It seemed like a code. But I'm pretty good at playing dumb—some would say it's not a stretch.

I looked confused. "I just thought a sandwich and maybe some Brunswick stew."

He leaned forward quick. "Oh. Right. Just a sammich."

The other men were extremely quiet. No eye contact. I decided to let them off the hook. I took a seat across from Rusty and looked at the ground.

"Of course"—I kept my voice low and my eye on the dirt—"I *would* need something to wash it down with."

And the group erupted. Guys were patting my back and Rusty was shaking his head.

He leaned way forward and slapped my knee. "Tha's pretty good, bud. I can fix you up." He looked me up and down. "I surely don't recognize you as a Tucker."

I nodded. "I grew up in south Georgia, but we moved up to Atlanta when I was eight or so." I looked around. "I've still got some cousins drifting around somewhere south of the gnat line. Don't know if I'd remember them or not."

He sighed, nodding. Then, like a rifle shot, his eyes zipped right into mine. "Hey! You ain't that boy had the crazy-ass grandma?"

I had to laugh. "Yeah. That's me. And for the record, the rest of her was pretty crazy too."

He smiled. "That was over . . . where? Around Ideal?"

I smiled back, tried not to lay on the irony too thick. "It was close to Ideal."

"Yeah, your grandma was the only reason the Piggly Wiggly ever even carried Bon Ami cleaner."

I nodded. "That was her brand, when the moon was right."

He leaned back, very happy. "That's right. I heard you was doin' okay up in Atlanta. Man, you come from the *really* crazy side of the family."

I smiled big. "And proud of it."

He looked off; shook his head in a very pleasant way. "Family." Then back at me. "How *is* your grandma?"

I shrugged. "Passed on."

He nodded. "Yeah." More nodding. "So, how you come to know Ronnie? He married my little brother's oldest, you know."

"Well, he did actually stop to 'help' me—him and Pevus. You had it right: I caught a flat. But in the end, they're just good boys—they didn't mean anything. Pevus is the only one that got hurt."

Rusty didn't ask, he just nodded. "Pevus needs guidance."

I agreed. "Well, me too. Who doesn't?"

Rusty leaned way back. "So whatcha down this way for?"

I indicated with my thumb. "Sally Arnold called a friend of mine in Atlanta. She wants me to help the Turner twins."

Somebody in the crowd offered a testimonial. "They good boys. They didn't have nothin' to do with Lowe."

Rusty was my interpreter. "Lowe Acree is the banker got murdered over here at Tifton. His wife killed him and everybody knows it, but Lowe's got a cousin in the law enforcement who don't like the Turners."

I looked up at Rusty. "How come?"

"I don't know, some kinda land deal." He lowered his voice and looked around the group. "Plus, I always thought Tommy was a little sweet on Lowe's wife hisself."

Here and there: an agreement.

"Tommy?"

He nodded. "Tommy Acree, Tifton Police. Lowe's cousin."

"Sweet on Lowe's wife?"

He avoided my eyes. "Some say."

That was it. Silence. I could tell we were about to discuss the weather, and I already knew it was hot.

I stood up. "Well, thank you, Mr. Tucker."

"It's Rusty."

"If you don't mind, I'll be back over this way for a taste one time or another. But I gotta go talk to Mr. Turner now."

He waved. "J.D.'s a good man. Tell 'im I said 'hey.' And you be welcome to some barbecue any old time."

I nodded, and headed over to the car. Sally smiled at me from her table; she was busy setting everybody else up with fine fried cuisine.

The woman who met me in the front yard came steaming up when I opened my door. "You can't leave. You just got here."

"Well, I really came to see J. D. Turner; help him out. They tell me he's at home."

She clouded up on me. "Oh."

"How long are you all usually here for one of these dinners? Maybe I'll make it back."

She shrugged. I didn't get the sudden attitude shift, but I shot out my hand just the same. "Thanks, anyway, Alma."

She didn't shake. "It's Alma *Acree* Lee." And she was gone like smoke.

Wherever you go, people take sides. Without even trying, I had.

# 8

## *Crow in the Corn*

In less than twenty minutes I was pulling into what I was hoping would be the Turner place. It looked like a lot of other farmhouses: plain white, aluminum siding, one story, kitchen in the center, small front porch. There was a woman in a chair on the porch with a colander in her lap and a paper sack at her feet. She was snapping pole beans.

I got out of the car and she looked up. The thing that made me nervous about most farms like this was the devil dogs they have lying around. These mutts want to eat your liver, it's their only joy. As luck would have it, the Turners kept no dogs.

The woman stopped her work, but didn't get up. I smiled, I waved, I took a step forward. "Hey. I'm Flap Tucker. Sally Arnold sent me over. Is this the Turner place?"

The woman nodded, stone-faced. From in the house I heard an old guy's voice.

"Who is it?"

"It's Flap Tucker out here. Is that Mr. Turner?"

I could hear a rustle and some old-guy noises. Then he appeared in the doorway. I think he'd been catching a nap.

"J. D. Turner. Come up on the porch."

"Thanks." I did.

There were four chairs. One was a rocker, the other three were ladder-backs. I figured the rocker was Mr. Turner's. I flopped down in another, and leaned back on the hind legs until my shoulders were against the house. Mr. Turner rocked and didn't look at me at all. The woman went back to snapping, but wouldn't take her eyes off me.

He gave a little cough. "I appreciate."

I smiled at the woman. Aunt Ida? "Sorry about your trouble."

Mr. Turner let out what, for a guy his size, seemed like a big breath. "Worse trouble ever. An' I's in the Depression."

"Uh-huh. I hope I can help. The boys headed toward the Savannah area, you think?"

He nodded, still focused on something way out in the fields. "They with her." He seemed very sad indeed.

"Her? You mean Lowe's wife?"

He nodded again, like we were talking about the dead.

"What was her name?"

"Lydia. She was a Habersham."

"Everybody seems to think she's the one that killed her husband."

He rocked. "Not everybody. Some that thinks my boys did it."

"Yeah. Lowe's cousin Tommy."

Again with the nod. Ida pulled a pencil out from behind her ear and tapped a couple dozen times on the colander.

Mr. Turner gave me a break. "She says Lowe's cousin Tommy is a Habersham by his mother's side, and it don't pay him to think his own kin did a killin'."

"Does that mean Lowe and Lydia were related?"

Ida tapped again.

Mr. Turner: "Don't know."

I leaned forward in the chair, all four legs on the floor. "What about some land deal Rusty told me about? Rusty says 'hey,' by the way."

" 'Hey' to Rusty." He coughed again. "Lowe wanted some land we got that's a ways off. Some kind of chemical dump. Boys didn't wanna sell—not for that."

"Lowe wanted the land?"

"Lowe and Tommy both. They did a lots together. This chemical dump thing was just another money plan. I took it they's mad at the boys not sellin'."

I leaned farther forward. "So what's the truth? Who killed Lowe Acree?"

He looked at me. It was a strong gaze for a man that seemed so

weak. "Lowe Acree was killed by his wife, but it was a accident. She got scared, ran off. She's not like other people. My boys went after. They love her like a sister."

Of course he thought that. He was their father. "So why does the law go after your boys?"

"Boys went in to see Lowe 'bout the land. They was in his office when he died. Nobody saw Lydia come in. Lowe was hollerin' at the boys about the land deal, and then Lydia said somethin' to him, whispered in his ear, and he fell forward. Head made a big noise on the dest."

"Desk?" I wasn't certain.

He nodded. "'Swhat I said. And then Lowe's secretary come in, seen nothin' but the boys, and Lowe facedown, some blood, and she called over to the police."

"And the boys split."

He nodded. "They got out right quick."

"An eyewitness all but saw them kill this guy, and they fled the scene."

"Uh-huh."

"Where'd they go?"

"Come home. Had supper. Told me an' Ida what happened. Went after Lydia."

"How'd they know where she went?"

He started rocking again. "Just did."

"When did all this happen?"

"Last Wednesday."

"Now they're in Savannah?"

Ida clicked.

Mr. Turner explained. "She thinks Tybee Island."

"Why does she think that?"

He looked in her direction. "Just does."

I gave up. "I'm told the boys don't look much alike—not for twins."

He agreed. "Some say."

Ida picked up her pencil like she was going to say something else, then put it back behind her ear instead.

I looked at Mr. Turner. "What kind of code is that she uses?"

"She made it up."

"How did you all learn it?" I probably should have known better than to ask.

He looked at me, this time like I was somebody from far, far away. "We family."

That was it. Ida went back to popping beans. Mr. Turner rocked for a while in silence. The silence was good.

Then he patted his leg. "Stay to supper."

"I had a mess of Sally Arnold's fried chicken over at the dinner on the grounds."

He smiled. It was a face that wasn't that used to smiling. "I miss that fried chicken."

"Why didn't you stay after church?"

He looked away again, off into the fields. "Ain't much to mix since the wife died. Tell the truth, half a time I get on back home, forget she ain't here."

"How long's she been gone?"

"Twenty-seven years."

Twenty-seven years an antisocialist, and still forgets the wife is gone. Some broken hearts never mend.

Ida stopped snapping again.

Mr. Turner looked at her, then away, slow. "She died birthin'."

"She died in childbirth?"

They both nodded.

"With the twins?"

Mr. Turner tightened his lips. It seemed like there was more to the story, but you don't pour your heart out to a stranger—not even a kind-hearted schmo like me who only wanted to help.

Finally Mr. Turner got a hold of himself. "Sally tell you about the money?"

"Money?"

"How you get paid."

"Dally said something about how you've got pine trees."

"Uh-huh."

"Plus, you took out a loan?"

"Got the cash. You be need'n' a little travelin' money."

"Yes."

He got himself to his feet. "Come on in the house."

Ida watched me get up. I did everything but wink at her, but she was immune to my charms.

Inside was dark, like a lot of older people's homes. Stuff was boiling on the stove. Good country Southern cooking's only happy if it's been boiled for three days in fat.

Mr. Turner handed me an envelope from the kitchen table. "That's the cash. The rest is in your name over at the Trust."

"You got me a checking account?"

He nodded. In the envelope, there was a big bundle of twenties and a checkbook with my name on it. The balance was written on the front. It was sizable.

"I won't need this much, Mr. Turner."

"Use what you need. Give the rest back to the bank to pay off the loan, let 'em keep a little of the land for the rest of it—everything else is yours."

"None of my business, but can you spare this land?"

He sat down at the kitchen table. "It's the land Lowe wanted to buy—Tommy still does, I reckon. I'd soon give it to you to help the boys." He cleared his throat.

I looked down at the envelope, shook it, then put it in my breast pocket. "So . . . this is from the land Lowe wanted to buy."

He watched me. "Little hot to be wearin' a suit."

I agreed. "But I always try to look my best. I'll need a picture of the boys—what they look like now."

He pulled over a book that was sitting on the table. "This's all I got."

It was their high school annual. He had the page marked with slips of paper.

There they were: two boys that didn't even look vaguely related except for the sweet smile and the names under the pictures.

I smiled back at them. "This is the most recent picture you got?"

He looked up at me. "You help my boys, Mr. Tucker. I can't do without 'em."

His face registered a couple of volumes more on that story. I looked out to the porch. "I'm going to go on and spend the night in Tifton, see can I talk to the bank secretary or maybe even Lowe's cousin Tommy."

He nodded.

"And then I'll get on down Savannah way. I could use me a little seafood."

"I like the scallops. Boys likes the shrimps."

I started out the door. He tried to stand, but I waved. "Keep your seat. I think I can find the car from here."

He waved back and coughed a little more.

Out on the porch Ida was getting up. She was all snapped out. I smiled at her and she whipped that pencil out from behind her ear and

did a Krupa on the porch rail. I had no idea what she wanted, but it seemed very earnest.

"Okay, ma'am. Nice to meet you."

From in the house Mr. Turner called out. "She wants me to tell you she's known Tuckers; thinks she knew your kin."

"I don't think so. My kin was from France." I didn't bother to mention that they were Huguenots in America by the time of the Revolution.

Ida shook her head strongly. I got the idea that maybe Mr. Turner wasn't translating everything. She tapped again.

I could barely hear Mr. Turner. "She says she knows what's the truth."

She nodded then, and headed for the screen door. I opened it for her. "You all take care. I'll be in touch."

They both waved, Ida without looking back. I let the screen door close and got down the steps to my car. There was a big black crow out on the edge of the corn in their kitchen garden. I thought about Sally's technique of fresh corn; paid no attention to the crow. Maybe I should have, but you can't think that every little thing is a sign, even if it is. That kind of thinking will make you paranoid, and that's the last thing you need in my line of work, where everybody and his brother's got something against you just because you're there. On the other hand, as the joke goes, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they *aren't* really out to get you.

# 9

## *"Countin' Flowers on the Wall . . ."*

I was over at the Tifton Motor Inn within the hour. In just about that amount of time I had Dally on the phone again, telling her the events of the day. She was confused.

"This is worse than a Russian novel trying to keep up with these names."

I tried to help. "It's not that hard. Everybody's a Tucker or a Turner—or an Arnold."

"Or a Tibadeau or an Acree or a . . . what was the woman that ended up hatin' you because you're there to help the killers?"

"She's a Lee by marriage, but she *was* an Acree, and that's what counts."

"I can't keep it straight."

"You don't need to. By the way, what about you and Charlie Arnold?"

"What about it?"

"Sally said you were sweet on him."

"Sally was sweet on him. I was saving myself for Mister Right."

"Then this'll hand you a laugh. She thinks you were waiting for me."

She didn't laugh. "I was just waiting."

I let it go. "Well, Mr. Turner seems a little on the frail side. And Aunt Ida is leaky in the brain pan."

"She just can't talk."

"Oh, there's way more to it than that. Her little Morse code is quirky, wouldn't you say? Plus, I believe she tried to tell me something that Mr. Turner didn't want me to know."

"Like what?"

"I have no idea."

"Yeah, well, then . . . get some sleep tonight. Call me in the afternoon. I'll have had time for that banking business by two o'clock."

"I hope I'll be in Savannah by then."

"You get to go to the beach. I'm envious. By the way, I made you a reservation at the DeSoto Beach Motel on Tybee."

"I know it well. Musta been hard to get this time of year on such short notice."

"Professional courtesy."

She amazed me. "Is there anybody in the state who doesn't know you?"

"Nobody worth knowin'."

I missed her already. "You know, I'd really rather just be hogging a barstool at Easy."

"You're goin' to the beach. That's where I'd rather be."

"Uh-huh. I have to drive for hours in my hot, sticky car while you get to lounge around in your nice cool nightclub. Who's playing tonight?"

"We're closed. Air conditioner's on the fritz."

"A likely story. I been in your joint when it was a hundred and fifty degrees."

"Still, we're closed."

"What's up, Dally?"

"Say good-bye, Flap. I got some work to do."

"Okay."

We hung up. I let my eye wander about the room: flowered wallpaper and two standing lamps. Aside from the bed I was lounging on, there was a closet, a chest of drawers, and a little tablelike desk. As luck would have it, there was also cable TV and an old movie channel. I was tired from all the driving, and still full from the dinner, so a little lying around watching old movies seemed just right. Kept me from thinking too much about anything.

# 10

## *The Trouble with Banks*

I got up early Monday morning; thought I could hit the bank first thing. I stepped out my door at the motor inn and saw somebody waist deep in my open hood, clunking around to beat the band.

"Morning."

A silence fell under the hood. Then: "That you, Mr. Tucker?"

Who should emerge but one Ronnie Tibadeau, yielding a socket wrench, greasy and grinning like a gibbon.

"Ronnie."

"Hey."

"Lose something?"

He looked back at my engine just to make sure. "Oh, no, sir. I just heard the way you was havin' trouble crankin' yesterday, and it sounded like a carburetor problem—which it was. So . . . you all set now."

"You fixed my car?"

He grinned even bigger. "Well, naw. Thas' gonna take a ton more work."

"And a bigger hammer."

"Right."

"But you fixed the carburetor?"

"Uh-huh. She crank right good now, I believe."

I buttoned my suit. "What do I owe you?"

He started backing away. Maybe he was shy, or maybe he was afraid I was going to get him close to an open car door. "You don' owe me a thing, Mr. Tucker. Peach and Maytag, they my buds. Plus you was awful nice to Pevus, considerin' the situation. I . . ." But he couldn't put the rest into words. "It's like a honor to help."

I moved toward the car, slammed the hood down. He backed up another step. "Well, you *know* what's wrong with you kids today?"

He was eager to hear. "No, sir. What?"

I gave him what I thought was a very friendly wave. "Nothing I can tell." I got in the car. "Take it easy." And my old heap turned over on the first try. I don't think it had done that since I bought it.

The bank was only a couple of blocks away. I shoved the door a little harder than I needed to, and it made a racket. There was nobody much in the place yet. A couple of tellers were getting the money ready, or whatever it is tellers do first thing. I sauntered over and gave it a shot.

"Hey." I waved.

One waved back. "Morning."

"Which one was Lowe's secretary?"

They both locked eyes on me. The one who waved stood up. "It's Connie."

She indicated with her head a small woman in front of the biggest office in the place. I could see, in front of the office, a portrait of a man posed as Southern aristocracy, and it had flowers all around it. The late Lowe Acree, I presumed.

I headed for Connie. She saw me coming.

"Hey, Connie. I'm Flap Tucker. Could I talk to you about this mess with the Turner boys?"

"You're a policeman?"

"No, ma'am."

She squinted. "Well, what do you want, then?"

"You saw the boys do it?"

"What do you want?"

Somebody came out of the office, and the security guard was ambling my way.

The guy from the office must have been the one in charge of foreclosures. He wanted me out right away. "You'll have to leave now if you're not a policeman. There's been enough publicity about this already."

"I'm not a reporter."

"Really." He didn't believe me.

"I'm helping Mr. Turner out. He just wants to know where his boys are."

That stopped him. "Well, me too." But he was mean about it.

Connie looked oddly relieved. "You're helpin' J.D.?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Neither my manners nor my helpful nature cut any mustard whatsoever with the office guy. "I don't really care who you're here to help. Unless you're opening an account, I'll have to ask you to leave."

He lifted his head to the security guy, who actually put his hand on his gun and stepped up right beside me.

I kept my eye on the office guy. "As it happens, I already *have* an account here. I'd like to cash a check."

Very carefully, showing the young and nervous security guard exactly what I was doing, I unbuttoned my suit coat and took out the checkbook in the breast pocket. I dangled it in the air like a little fish.

Office Guy was peevish. "Name."

"Flap Tucker."

He rolled his head. "We'll check." And he lumbered over to the nearest computer terminal. Apparently everything was in order, because he just got madder.

"Amount."

I reached for the pen on Connie's desk. "Twenty thousand dollars."

His eyes shot up from the monitor screen. I made as to write the check. He took a step toward me.

"We . . . that will almost close out your account—and of course an amount of that nature would require a little notice or a cashier's check."

I started to fill in an amount. "I *want* to close out my account here—you're not friendly. I want cash, I don't trust your cashiers or their checks, they're not very friendly either."

He was coming over to me and brushing the security guard aside. "We're not prepared to offer you that much cash at this moment."

"You're not *offering* me anything, I'm just taking my own money out of your cheesy little bank and giving it to somebody who's a little more courteous."

Connie sat down, trying not to smile. I smiled back at her, and she looked up.

"Are you kin to Rusty Tucker?"

"It's possible."

She looked real close at my mug. "Did I see you yesterday at the dinner meeting?"

"At the Baptist? Yes, ma'am."

I finished making out the check and handed it to Office Guy. He didn't even look at it. He was still staring at me and trying to explain the rules of our national financial institutions.

"FDIC only really allows us a maximum cash transaction—"

"Don't you be spelling things out to me, pal. Just how much do you think your dinky little operation here *can* manage?"

He looked at the check, started to hand it back to me, and tell me

to take it to the cashier's window, but then he saw I'd only made it for a couple hundred, and I was continuing my conversation with Connie.

"That Sally Arnold sure is nice."

Connie agreed. "She's real smart too. I bet she told you about ostrich."

"Yup."

"Won't stop talkin' about it."

"It's the red meat of the future."

"We keep goats."

"Now, Connie, there's some that think it makes a good barbecue, a goat, but legally barbecue is only pig. The rest is just some kind of meat cooked outside and ought not to be called *barbecue* at all."

"You sound like my husband."

"That lucky man."

She giggled like a kid, which she was far from. "Stop it."

"Okay."

"But Sally *is* nice. She's one of our best volunteers at the church."

I nodded. "She's got a good nature. She's the one called me in to help find the Turner boys."

Connie looked away. "She would. She always wants to help."

I lowered my voice. "Sorry, Connie, but what about seeing the boys in Lowe's office?" I nodded toward the picture in the flowers. "That him?"

She nodded, lowering her voice to match mine. "By the time I came in, Lowe was . . . gone. But I heard him yelling at the boys?" Almost a whisper: "Telling them they were *retarded* and all . . . which they're not."

"They just didn't want to give him that land."

"Right."

"But he was loud."

"Uh-huh. He yelled a lot. Lost his temper somethin' awful."

"And then you heard a bump or something."

I could barely hear her. "It was like somebody dropped a big old rock on the desk."

"And then you went in?"

"I thought Lowe had thrown something at the boys. But then it was real quiet, and Peachy hollered out, said come in quick, and there was Lowe. It was . . . a mess."

She had to quit talking. Office Guy, dumb as a stump, was still standing there with the check in his fingers. "You don't have to say anything to him, Connie."

She looked at me again. "It was awful."

I looked over at Office Guy. "Got my cash yet?"

"Oh." Before he could think, he headed off to the cashier's window.

I returned to Connie. "You don't think the boys did it."

"They said Ms. Acree had come in—his wife? But I didn't see her. She was a very different sort of a person. I'd just as soon believe she did it . . . and I wouldn't blame her." Once again with the lowered volume, this time more intense. "He used to hit her—even in public."

"What for?"

"He . . . not to say anything bad about him, now, because he's dead and all, but he was just plain mean. He was a very violent man, even at work, but especially in the evenings. You just never could tell what he might do."

"To everybody."

She nodded; looked down. "Mostly to women."

He must have been a swell boss to have. "You don't know if they did an autopsy, do you?"

"No. I mean, I don't know if they did or not."

"Okay." I smiled at her. "Thanks, Connie."

She gave me a little nod, like a period at the end of a sentence. Then she leaned real close. "Peaker Brothers might know."

I leaned in too. "Who are the Peaker brothers?"

"Morticians."

"They're here in town?"

"Just down the block."

Office Guy was back. "Here." He handed over the cash.

I stood, still looking at Connie. "That was quick—but I'm still changing banks."

He didn't care. "You do that."

I shot him a look that's supposed to mean something in French. I got the impression he didn't speak any foreign languages, but he understood me well enough.

Still, I had to ask. "You don't know me. Why, exactly, are you such a firecracker?"

He was plain. "I just don't like troublemakers."

I stuck out my lip. "Seems to me there's already been enough trouble to go around, but I believe it started since way before I got here."

"Well, it was those retarded Turner twins killed Lowe Acree—and I don't like the idea of you or anybody else helping them get away with it."

Connie's voice was very even for a change. "This is Byron Lee. I believe you met his wife yesterday at the dinner. She used to be an Acree?"

I got it. "You're *Alma*'s husband."

He bobbed his head once; it was more like a punch in the face than a period in a sentence.

People will tell you it's a small world, but it's not. It's a great big old world, only it's filled with a lot of small towns.

I put the cash in my pants pocket and smiled at Connie. She smiled back, gave a look at Alma's husband, and stopped smiling. I waved at the security guard on the way out. He didn't wave back.

# 11

## *The Trouble with Mortuaries*

The Peaker Brothers' establishment was a grand old Confederate mansion–looking place with a square black sign out front: Peaker Family Mortuary, Caring Since 1934.

Inside, the climate control was cranked to the maximum and the air was filled with the scent of jasmine. No one came to the entranceway, so I looked around. I'd never been inside a mortuary before—although I'd known morticians. They always seemed to me to be detached from a normal relationship with reality.

I've made the mistake in my life of reading a lot of books on world religions, and the Buddha tells us that a sort of nonattachment is a good way out of the troubles in this world. But then he also says you're supposed to have compassion all over the place. The only things I've ever had any kind of passion for at all were the things that I'd formed an attachment to. Either you care or you don't. I mean, why do you think Jesus wept, anyway? I always thought it was because he was supposed to have cared.

I was looking up at a picture of Jesus holding a lamb, looking very much like he cared, when dulcet tones floated through the air behind me.

"Jesus wept."

I turned to face him. "I was just thinking about that."

He was late twenties, bald, and kindly. "Jesus wept when he lost even one lamb. It hurt him to see any sorrow. Let him be your rock."

"Okay."

That seemed good enough for him. "Porter Peaker. How may I help?"

"You and your brother took care of Lowe Acree."

"We did."

"Was there an autopsy, do you know?"

"Oh." His demeanor relaxed. "Newspaper?"

"What makes you say that?"

"If you were a policeman, you'd already know that Lowe's cousin, Tommy Acree, would not authorize an autopsy. He's a policeman himself, and he's got ways."

Ways of *what* we didn't get into. "Somebody told me he was sweet on Lowe's wife."

He nodded. "Some say. I wouldn't know. Is that what you wanted to ask?"

I shook my head. "So, no autopsy?"

"No autopsy."

"Any special . . . circumstances of the body?"

"Are you a reporter?"

"Nope."

"Tell me the truth."

I stuck out my hand. "I'm Flap Tucker from Atlanta. Sally Arnold over at the college called me in to help out J. D. Turner. He can't put his hand to his boys right now."

"You're here to help the Turner twins?"

I couldn't tell from his expression which side of the issue he came down on. I had guessed by now that nearly everybody in town would come down on one side or the other. He kept his eyes on me and called out over his shoulder. "Pyle?"

From a room deeper in the mortuary, I heard another voice. "What?"

"Would you come out here, please?"

After a couple of seconds there was another Peaker. The family resemblance was unmistakable. The Addams Family had moved to Mayberry.

Porter explained things to his brother. "Says he's here to help the twins."

Pyle nodded. I didn't know if I was about to be taken into a confidence or thrown out on my leaden backside.

They motioned me back to an office. I followed, but I was on my guard. I think I could have taken them in a fair fight, but they had needles and scalpels and God knows what else on their side.

We all sat. Pyle was the first to explain. "We're not doctors."

Porter chimed in. "But we're quite knowledgeable."

Pyle continued. "We think Lowe Acree had an aneurysm."

Porter agreed. "And it caused heart failure."

I sat back. "What makes you think all this?"

Pyle was first. "Three things." He held up three fingers to prove it. "First, the Turner twins are incapable of hurting anyone."

This worried Porter. "But that's not very scientific."

Pyle was undaunted. "No, but second, the bump on Lowe's head was not a bad one, and could not possibly, all by itself, have caused anybody's death."

Porter was more satisfied with this line of thinking. "When you've seen as many bodies as we have, you get to know a thing or two."

Pyle nodded. "And three: There were no other bruises or wounds or scratches or anything anywhere on Lowe at all. Not anywhere. A little discoloration on his throat, but we think his neck was swollen after he passed out and his collar and tie choked him."

Porter wanted to make it clearer. "How did the Turners crack him on the head without touching him? No weapons. No sticks. No anything. Lowe hit his head on the desk."

Pyle was satisfied. "He fell forward and hit his head on the desk. He was already dead. Everything about that body said heart attack to me."

Porter was happy to agree. "Me too."

I understood. "And when you've seen as many bodies as you all have . . ."

They smiled.

Porter leaned forward. "We buried Lowe Acree in boxer shorts."

I was temporarily at a loss.

Pyle giggled like a kid. "Big white boxer shorts with red hearts . . . and Dalmatian dogs all over them."

Porter tapped my leg. "That way, if they exhume the body anytime soon, we'll have an opportunity to say we had some suspicions about a heart attack."

Or a Dalmatian dog attack, but I resisted the urge to mention it.

Pyle sighed. "Also, we thought it would cheer Tommy up."

Porter settled back. "He's so distraught." He looked at me very

genuinely. "It's our job to make people feel better. We thought it would help lighten his load."

Pyle shook his head. "But I don't think he understood me when I told him about it—the boxer shorts—at the funeral? He just looked at me for a long time and then said he'd send us a check."

I smiled. "Why are you telling me this?"

Porter offered. "We went to grammar school with Peachy and Maytag. They're good boys."

Pyle qualified it. "Not to say they're not a little strange in their ways . . ."

Porter was undaunted. ". . . but I'll tell you what's the truth: They never killed a fly—let alone a banker."

Just to keep things straight, I had to ask. "Who did kill Lowe Acree?"

Pyle, in what I took to be an uncharacteristic bit of bile, made a mean noise. "I don't know, but if I'd been there, I might have helped."

Porter explained. "We went to school with Lowe too. He was always a bully." He lowered his voice. "He beat Pyle up two days in a row once."

Pyle tightened his lips. "Him and three of his friends."

Porter looked down. "I was home with the measles."

I looked at Pyle. "What made him quit?"

Porter answered. "I got over the measles and went back to school, that's all. He'd never gang up on the two of us. He was a bully *and* a coward."

You had to wonder if maybe that episode hadn't had something to do with burying the guy in humiliating underwear. Morticians' revenge.

Pyle stood. "I've got to get back to work. I'm happy to have met you. I hope you can help the Turners."

I stood too. "I hope I can *find* the Turners."

Porter joined us out the door. "Oh, they're not smart enough to hide all that well. You won't have much trouble."

Pyle stood in the doorway to his workroom. "Old Mr. Turner must be worried sick."

I had to agree there. "He seems kind of sick anyway."

They nodded solemnly. It was a fine example of professional synchronized sympathy. Porter broke the silence. "He hasn't been the same since his wife died."

It was obviously something they'd heard everybody say. They weren't old enough to know what he was like before she died.

Just at the door, back out in the heat, I turned to Porter again. "Any idea how I can get ahold of Tommy?"

"Police station's right there at the town square." He pointed. "Can't miss it."

"Thanks."

He closed the door behind me. I got the impression they were the sort of morticians that played jokes on each other in the middle of the night, putting the stiffs into funny positions to crack each other up, sitting the bodies up in each other's offices when nobody was looking, generally playing around. I think it was right about then I decided to have my body cremated.

# 12

## *The Trouble with Police Stations*

The police station was nearly as cold as the mortuary, but a lot brighter and noisier. There was a very cheery young woman at a desk just inside the front door.

"Hey. What can I do you for?"

I resisted any sort of *urban* comeback to the question. "Looking for Detective Tommy Acree."

"Well, he won't be hard to find." This was a good joke to her. "He *works* here."

I played along. "That *will* make it easier. Think he's in?"

She sang out. "Tommy?"

There was a voice down the hall. "Doe-reen?"

"Somebody's here to see you. Are you in?" She winked at me.

"Send 'em back."

She pointed; I smiled at her. "Nice intercom system."

She got another laugh. I headed down the hall. First door on the left and there was a guy behind a desk sipping coffee and motioning me in.

Before I even sat down, I thought I should make matters clear. "Name's Flap Tucker. Mr. Turner has hired me to find his boys. I was just hoping I could ask you a few questions."

He set his coffee down on his desk and I was a little surprised to see him stick out his hand.

I shook it. He talked. "Welcome to Tifton. How'd you like Sally's fried chicken?"

I understood. He was telling me he already knew everything about me. "I liked it fine. Good cutoff corn too."

"She's got a secret method."

I sat. "The extension-cord method. We discussed it."

He leaned back in his chair. "Sally's a fine woman and we all think the world of her, but as you might imagine, we've got a whole lot of people around here already lookin' for Peach and Maytag Turner."

"Yeah, but Mr. Turner's worried."

"Mr. Turner's worried because of my . . . relationship with Lowe Acree and his wife. He thinks the boys won't get a fair shot."

"But they will."

"From me they'll get the same treatment I give to any criminal."

"I see."

"So your help is most likely not needed."

"Still, Mr. Turner's paying me, and I don't like to take the money and run."

He sighed. "If you interfere with our investigation, I'll put you in the jailhouse."

"I'm very big on noninterference."

"I hope so."

I looked around his office. "You don't want to see my P.I. license?"

He sighed again. "You're a licensed private investigator?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're not a friend of the family?"

"Well, I am now."

"Are you related to our Tuckers hereabout?"

"I could be."

He considered. "Well, Rusty Tucker is a friend of mine, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Me too." But I had no idea what he was getting at.

"You're from Atlanta?"

"Yes."

"Work there?"

"Often."

"I see." I think he was understanding something about me that may not have been accurate, but I wasn't going to argue, because it looked like it was helping.

I sat up. "I guess you'd have to say that Lydia Acree is missing too."

His face was a block of marble. "Uh-huh. I'll find her."

"You don't think she's dead?"

"I pray to God she's not."

"But there are those in town that believe she's another victim of the Turner killing spree."

"There are those."

I hesitated. "What's she like?"

This irritated him. "What's she like? What kind of a question is that?"

I didn't know what kind of a question it was, but it obviously meant more to him than it did to me. "I was just wondering."

"Well, I'm pretty busy now. You'll have to excuse me." He stood up, visibly agitated, to usher me out the door. "But before you leave, I *will* have a look at that license—and we'll be taking your fingerprints too. I'd like to have them on file."

I couldn't figure what had gotten him so instantly riled. I kept my seat. "My fingerprints are already on file with the licensing bureau in Atlanta. You can send for a copy."

"I'd like to have some originals."

"Make up a charge, get a warrant, find me, arrest me, and book me—then you can have some originals. Until that happens, I'll be on my way." Then I stood up.

He took another step. He was inches from me. "I'll be looking at your gun registration too."

I didn't move a muscle. "Don't carry one."

"Is that right?" He reached around behind him and pulled out his own gun—not to point it at me, just to show it to me. "Does this one make you nervous?"

"Nope."

He tried his best to sound tough. "It ought to."

I stuck my face even closer. "The last time I was afraid to die was over twenty years ago—I was quite young."

He smiled. "Oh, I could do lots worse things with this gun than kill you."

"No you couldn't."

"You don't think so?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Because if you started something, you'd have to kill me. I wouldn't quit coming till you did. You can take *that* to the bank you got down the block." Things were very tense for a sec-

ond. "And while you're there, why don't you run up an alley and holler 'fish.' "

He was momentarily discombobulated. "What?"

"You heard me."

He busted out laughing. "Yeah. I heard you. That's from the *Andy Griffith Show*."

I nodded, stepped back; relaxed. "It was Gomer."

"Says it to Barney in the 'Citizen's Arrest' episode."

"Right."

He put his gun away. " 'Run up an alley had holler *fish*.' What a stupid thing to say."

I relaxed. "Always handed me a laugh."

He was with me. "I love that show."

"Me too."

He actually patted my back. "Well, Flap—you're a tough guy."

I disagreed. "No such thing. I'm a layabout."

"I guess you get to watch a lotta TV in your line of work."

"A fair amount."

He patted me again. "You really related to Rusty?"

"Any Tucker's a Tucker, I guess."

"Well, don't get in my way on this thing, Tucker or not. I'll snap an obstruction-of-justice charge on you like a bat on a cow's neck. Then you could spend some time in our little lockup here." Smile chiseled out of a big block of ice. "Otherwise, help yourself. We'll get to 'em before you do anyway. It'll be some easy money for you."

"Yeah. It's been easy so far."

"Got any leads?"

"Where would a guy like me get leads?"

He looked at me sideways for a while, then let it go. "See you."

I headed out the door. "Hope not."

He stood in his doorway watching me leave. I had planned to stop and ask the perky secretary about Lydia Habersham, but the cold eyes of the law would have none of it.

I bumped out the door and into the rising heat; headed back to my car. I'd talked to a lot of people, and gotten a lot of opinions, but I didn't seem any closer to the truth.

# 13

## *Silver Queen*

I decided to try for Savannah before the heat got really brutal. The drive over from Tifton's not so bad if you don't mind the scenic route. You get to go by a lot of farms and in the summer the corn is as high as an elephant's eye. This has always been a surreal image to me: an elephant in a cornfield. Gave me nightmares as a kid. Why did they write it that way? Why couldn't the corn be as high as the Fourth of July? Corn tassels even look like fireworks. But, I reminisce.

I got back to the car, and this time there was a dead body under it. Only when I made a noise, the legs wiggled and Ronnie Tibadeau squirmed out from under.

"U-joint's greased." He got himself to his feet. "Plus, I took care of everything else."

"Everything else?"

He looked back at the car, to make sure it was still there. "Yeah. Everything else, you know . . . plus, it's all good to go now."

No idea what *everything else* entailed, but I'm not that mechanical. "Ronnie, you're going to town on this car. What's the deal?"

"Got nothin' better to do."

"Pevus take his wife up to the doctor?"

Ronnie nodded. "Thas' where he is now."

"Did you do anything else to the car I should know about? Supercharge it, bore out the cylinders?"

He grinned. "Naw. I knew you was goin' to Savannah, so I thought she might need a little work—you know."

"Well." I mean, what can you say? I didn't even feel like asking *how* he knew where I was going. "By the way, does everybody in the *world* know that Peach and Maytag went down Savannah way?"

He looked down. "Aw, I reckon there's some that don't know it. I hear they got a lots a people over in China."

"Yeah. They do."

"Have a good trip."

I opened up the door and he stood back. This time I was certain he was standing clear of it, but maybe it was just an automatic response. I smiled at him. "*Peachy* and *Maytag*. That's some strange names for a couple of farm boys, don't you think?"

This was the biggest joke he'd ever heard. "You got a name like *Flap* an' you wanna ast me that?"

"Okay." I shoved the key in the ignition and it roared right up. "You got me there."

He waved. I pulled out. Farewell, Tifton.

Now, as I was saying, the corn was up and tasseled. I've got a romance with corn, especially Silver Queen. It's probably primal. About the time of my youth I was reading too much world religion, I also got hooked on mythology. In a couple of native American cultures, corn is responsible for the creation of human beings. I don't know all that much about my family history, but I could believe corn somehow played a part. Doesn't stop me from taking a bite out of a roasted ear if I get the chance.

Eventually, though, the cornfields pass and the air begins to fill up with the sea, and the sulfur, the awful hellish smell from the paper mill; and the Spanish moss hangs low, and the big white cranes balance on one leg in a marshy lowland, and you're nearly into the city.

Savannah's more gothic than Charleston, in the Romantic sense. And it's more urbane than any coastal city in Florida. Parts of the port look like New Orleans—parts look like Hell on a bad day.

Down on River Street, where the big boats come in, there used to be a place called the Night Flight Cafe, where I played when I was the aforementioned callow something-or-other. Jazz with a little *j*. The big hit for us was an old Cab Calloway tune, "Minnie the Moocher," all about a frail dame—something of a Silver Queen herself, now that I think of it, though by no means to imply that the song itself is corny—

who was in love with a guy named Smoky Joe, a cokehead. In my youth, I could *hi-de-ho* till the cows came home. But the Night Flight's gone now.

River Street's looking fair, though. It's a great place for the tourists. So is the historical district. Got a lot of swell bed-and-breakfast joints. For me, it's all too far from the sea. If I'm that close to the beach, I want to be able to roll myself out of bed and down to the water without actually having to get up off the ground. That's why you have to go to Tybee Island.

# 14

## *Stardust*

It always seems like a long drive out a two-lane with marsh and seawater on either side, but once you're on the island, it's worth it. The first big place you come to after the turn in the road is the DeSoto Beach Motel. It was probably something in the big-band days. I think there used to be a dance-hall pier out on the water where all the greats played: Ellington, the Dorsey brothers, Glenn Miller. Now it's kind of weedy and nobody much goes there, but the ambience is just right for me, and all that great music—melodies of days gone by, like "Stardust"—all on the jukebox in the lounge.

I pulled into the gravel parking lot. It was just as I'd remembered it: big, clunky, beautiful, and nearly empty. Checking in was a breeze, Dally had made all the arrangements. I had what amounted to a suite, which only meant there were two rooms together with a kind of sitting room in between, but it was up high and there was a bay window overlooking the beach. After I threw my junk in the closet, and unpacked a very important grocery sack, I gave a call down to the concierge, just for laughs.

"Hey, Flap Tucker, Room Twenty-seven. I was just wondering if my friends had checked in yet."

"I'll be happy to look for you, Mr. Tucker. What were their names?"

"Turner."

She checked. No Turners yet. She checked some more, and seemed worried. "Um, Mr. Tucker? We don't seem to see any reservations under *Turner* for this week at all."

"No kidding. Maybe I better give 'em a call at home. Could you give me an outside line?"

"Surely."

And there was an instant dial tone. I tried the same trick with the three other hotels on the island. No dice. The boys weren't in a hotel on Tybee, or else they weren't as simple as everybody thought and had used another name. It was worth a check, though; it gave me the sense of having done a little work. So I felt I deserved a break. I shuttled myself down to the lounge with the grocery sack in my arms.

The lounge was just what a good bar ought to be. Kind of small, a little dark, not so clean that you were nervous about spilling anything, and loaded up with atmosphere. I jammed myself onto a barstool and conked the sack onto the countertop. The mistress of the establishment approached, a fine, handsome woman in her early fifties, long straight gray hair that somehow actually made her look younger.

"What can I get for you?"

I shoved the sack her way. "In here there are three bottles of the famous 1983 Château Simard. I would like to drink them all, but I would like to do it in these very pleasant surroundings. And despite the fact that they're already bought and paid for, I will tip generously anyone who would not only open, decant, and pour this stuff for me, but guard it so nobody else gets any. It's not that I'm greedy, but this is the only sort of wine I can stand to drink, and you've got so much other stuff here for everybody else. If I go sharing my particular poison with all and sundry, by and by it's all gone. Then I'm unhappy, and the generous tips evaporate, you understand. So I'm asking, could we make an arrangement?"

She had to laugh. "You must be Flap. Dally said you was a character."

"And she was right." I'm never surprised anymore when somebody I meet knows Dalliance Oglethorpe. She gets around plenty—plus, she's in the bar business, and it's a kind of network, or family, like any other. Lots of people know about her joint, Easy. It's a home away from home for a brace of oddballs. And anybody that knows Dally loves her—you'd have to be crazy *not* to be crazy about her.

The barkeep stuck out her hand. "It's June."

"Hey, June. So Dally called you about me."

She nodded. "Said you'd be down. Told me to help if I could."

"Can you?"

"Sugar babe, there ain't a thing that happens on this island I don't know a little somethin' about. Not to mention I'm clairvoyant."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yup. The very first time I laid eyes on my third ex-husband? I knew he was trouble. And sure enough."

"Amazing."

"That's not all. I can predict the future."

"I see."

"Ask me something big."

"How does the world end?"

"Not with a bang but a whimper."

Now I *was* amazed. "Clairvoyant *and* educated."

"Got a friend who's interested in the poetry. Ask me somethin' else. Somethin' closer to hand. Somethin' you really wanna know."

I nodded. "I really want to know what I'm having for dinner. Had a long drive on an empty stomach."

She whisked away my wine and walked toward the other end. Over her shoulder she answered, "That's easy. Scallops. They're very fresh." She put two bottles beside what looked like her own purse under the cash register. The other she turned, opened slowly, popped the cork, sniffed it, smiled, and poured me a taste.

She came back, set the glass—along with the cork—in front of me. I saluted her with the glass, and took the first sip. It's very rich, even right when you open it. "Well, okay. I love scallops, you know."

She closed her eyes. "Yes. I know. What kind of clairvoyant would I be?"

"Where are they, these scallops?"

"Down at the end of the beach, little shack." She shrugged. I had the idea I'd see it when I got there.

"How are they cooked?"

"Lightly sautéed. Ask for one of Tina's tables. She's my girl. What I don't know, she does."

"Okay. Tina's table."

"What else?"

I took another sip and looked around. The place was nearly empty. "Okay, what about the Turner boys?"

"Sorry?"

"Dally told you why I'm here."

She took a second, then decided to be straight with me. "Uh-huh, but they're not on Tybee, that I know—or they're really crafty."

"I'm told that's not an option." I sipped again. "But you never know."

"Cops don' think they're here. Police been an' gone; swarmed ever'-which where. Didn't find a trace. Boys're most likely in Savannah."

I set the glass down and gazed out the window at the blue, blue sky and the white ocean breaking. "So. Maybe I'm just here on vacation."

She was sympathetic to the idea. "It's nice here this time a year. What with the ocean an' everything."

I held out my hand. "How about telling my fortune? Am I going to have a good vacation?"

She glanced down at my hand. "You got a big surprise comin' to you."

"Really. And what might that be?"

"If I tell you," she patted the bar and strolled away, "it won't be a surprise."

I had to hound her. "That's easy for you to say. Anything remotely out of the ordinary after such a pronouncement, it's bound to seem like a fulfillment."

She didn't look back. "The world is fulla skeptics."

I had to agree. And by my reckoning, the world is also short on poetry-quoting barkeeps. She had, after all, foretold my scallops, which I was bound to have. So what did I have to lose? I had to ask the last question.

"What about a Lydia Habersham?"

She froze. "What about her?"

"She's been known to haunt these parts."

"So?"

"So is she here now?"

June came back to me with her attitude adjusted more than somewhat. "I kinda feel Lydia is like a second daughter to me, right? I don't want anything to happen to her."

I looked at my glass. "What could happen to her?"

"Guy like you? I'm guessing just about anything."

I sipped. So why was everybody so protective-feeling about Lydia? I decided on a change of approach. "How'd you come to know her?"

"She had a big boat out here, charter fishing mostly. Before she got married to that skunk. Came in here of an evening to listen to the

tunes. Didn't drink, but liked the company. She's a livin' doll. I got attached right away."

I could tell there was more to it than that. I set the glass down again; couldn't help noticing she talked about Lydia in the past tense. "Big boat. She had dough."

June shook her head. "Parents give her money to keep away from 'em. They didn't care much for her, seemed to me. She's not like other girls."

Seemed to be the story I was getting from most everybody. "Got a picture?"

She blinked and then stared. I returned the favor. Finally she straightened and got a little framed newspaper article from off the wall behind her. It was a color feature article in the local paper all about a girl who'd been missing three weeks at sea with no provisions and came back into Tybee one afternoon fresh as a daisy like nothing had happened. She said she thought she'd been gone for a day or two. The picture wasn't much help. Lydia looked pale and thin, with long sun-blond hair flying every which way in the ocean breeze, covering up most of her face. Even so, I guess most anybody would have set her down as pretty. And there was even something vaguely familiar about her, like a fashion model, maybe. I wished I could have gotten a better look at her face.

I handed the frame back to June. "What happened? Where was she all that time?"

June put the thing back in its place of honor. "The explanations run from alien abduction to some Cuban drug connection."

"Which one do you buy?"

She shrugged. "Lydia loves the ocean. She just lost track of the time."

For three weeks? But I didn't say it. Instead: "So, are you going to guard my wine for me, or not?"

She was happy to return to less personal matters. "Like it was my own. You see, I set it right next to my purse."

"I noticed."

"By the way, you got a little trouble ahead of you. You wanna be careful." She tapped her forehead, right about the position of the third eye, if you believe that sort of thing.

"Must be a kind of curse, this psychic thing."

She glanced up at the wall clock. "Why doncha finish off that glass and take a little nap before dinner? You been travelin'."

Now, a nap is just fine with me nearly any time of the day, but I

got the idea she knew something I didn't. Still, I felt she was full of good advice and kind intention, so I indulged her by tossing back the rest of the Simard and leaving a five on the bar beside my empty glass.

I stood up, but I couldn't resist the jukebox. I sidled over, idly pocketed a pack of matches from the top of it—never know when you're going to need a light. I checked the selections, popped a quarter in, and mashed R2: "Stardust." It was good exit music.

Up the stairs I could still hear it a little. I was humming to myself, when I noticed the door to my room was open. I stopped humming, walked slower. Maybe it was the maid service. I poked my head in. There was somebody in the suite all right. They were in the other bedroom; sounded like they were rummaging around. I slipped up to the doorframe and tried to get a peep in. All I could see was a smallish figure bent over one of the drawers looking for something.

I stepped into the doorway to block egress. "Looking in the wrong place, pal. My stuff's in the other bedroom. Something I could help you with?"

And who should turn around with the face of an angel and a dress in each hand but none other than Dalliance Oglethorpe.

She smiled big. "Yeah, you can help me decide which one of these things to wear to go to dinner with you."

I must have been smiling pretty good too. "Well, you got me. This is indeed a surprise, as our psychic bartender downstairs just foretold."

"I've got to admit I put her up to it." She dropped the darker of the two dresses on the bed. "I tried to hint to you. When's the last time I closed Easy just because one of the utilities didn't work?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I thought that was a little fishy, if I may use that word on an island such as this."

"You may. How's June?"

"Cagey."

"We go way back."

"I gathered. She's pretty sure, by the way, that the boys aren't here."

"She ought to know, or her daughter, one or the other."

I leaned against the doorframe. "We'll ask tonight at dinner, I guess. She told me about some scallops on the other end of the island that her daughter will be only too glad to bring us."

"Tina? She's a good kid."

She held up the blue number in her left hand. I nodded. "I'm not sure exactly why you're here."

She went to hang it up on her bathroom door, yakking at me over her shoulder. "I've got news; plus, I want to hear what's up."

I retired to the sitting room that divided our two bedrooms. The view of the beach was very absorbing. I couldn't take my eyes off it, even when Dally came in and sat beside me.

She stared too. "Great room, huh?"

"Nice window."

I took the next twenty minutes filling her in: meeting the folks in Tifton, Mr. Turner, the Peakers, the cop.

As it turned out, she'd been working too. "Called the Tifton Home Loan. They have, in fact, got a parent bank in Savannah: Southeastern Federal. What's the connection?"

"I have no idea."

"Why'd you want to know?"

"I'm telling you, I've got a hunch."

She wasn't impressed. "Uh-huh."

"Sling me that phone book beside you. Let's try a little something. You'll see. This hunch thing, it's a system with me. You absolutely *have* to follow your instincts. They tell you so much more than your noodle."

She rolled her eyes. "Anybody ever accuse you of bein' too much in touch with your feminine side?"

I squinted. "Nobody alive."

She grinned, reached over to the table by her elbow, and tossed me the Savannah Bell. I flipped to the *S*'s and dialed the front desk.

"Hello, Mr. Tucker."

"Hey. Could I get an outside line again, please?"

"Right away."

Dial tone. I popped in the number.

A woman answered. "Southeastern Federal."

"Hey, I got a Ms. Lydia Habersham here wants to cash a check for a hundred dollars. Just making sure it's covered."

Pause.

"Who is this?"

"It's Tony over at the marina."

"Ms. Habersham has *loans* with us. We don't handle any checking. May I speak with her, please?"

"Uh . . . sure. Hang on."

I covered the phone tight with my hand and whispered to Dally, "She wants to talk to Lydia. You've got loans, but they don't do checking. Keep it terse, they might know her voice."

Dally gave me the eye, but she took the phone. I moved in close to listen. She spoke. "Hi."

"Ms. Habersham?"

"Uh-huh."

"Are you all right?"

"Uh-huh."

"You know you don't have checking with Southeastern Federal, darlin'."

"Oh. Is this Southeastern Federal? Shoot. I must have given him the wrong number."

Pause. "The wrong number?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who is this?"

I punched the button and the phone disconnected. Dally handed me back the receiver and I put the phone on the table.

I shook my head. "So she's got an account there."

She grinned. "That's part of *my* news."

"What?"

She was very pleased with herself. "*I've* got an account there too. Care to go check on it?"

"You put money into Southeastern Federal?"

She stood. "Had to. I wanted all my phone calls to carry weight. Money talks. Anyway, pays to spread it around. I diversify as much as you reminisce. Let's go into town. Maybe we can find out more."

Something was up with her. She was never *this* interested in the work she got me. Plus, what was she doing slinging her money around the state like that? I tried to hedge. "I was going to take a nap."

"Jeez, Flap. Show a little gumption. Savannah's only twenty minutes away the way I drive. We can make it right now if we hurry. Come on."

Five minutes later we were barreling down the road nearly a hundred miles an hour in Ms. Oglethorpe's red convertible rental job, headed for downtown Savannah. I tried to holler at her with the wind whipping around us.

"Things seem to be moving a little fast, doncha think?"

But she couldn't hear me. Probably wouldn't have agreed anyway.

# 15

## *Money and Marigolds*

In Savannah the humidity was exactly 100 percent. You could literally swim through the air. The Southeastern Federal building was imposing, sunny, landscaped within an inch of its life—but it was mostly marigolds, a pedestrian annual that I personally wouldn't give you the time of day for. I was happy to get out of the heat. Dally was happy to be in on the work. She didn't ordinarily tag along with me, but I had the sense she was especially interested in this one—plus, she was having fun. It was like a beach vacation for her, too, I guess—and who was I to spoil her vacation?

I nodded toward a loan officer in the row of desks to our left. "Get the younger guy there."

"What for?"

"Because we know for sure that *he's* not the person we talked to on the phone a minute ago. That was, if you'll recall, a woman. And because he'll find you enchanting. All the young guys do."

She accepted it, and we ambled toward him in a friendly enough fashion. He saw us coming and set down the papers he was reading.

"How are you?"

Dally smiled. I've already mentioned what kind of an effect that can have. "Fine and dandy. Just want to check on my account."

"Have a seat." He was very happy to help us.

We sat. She did the talking. "Dalliance Oglethorpe. Just transferred some funds here from Atlanta. Lookin' to add another nightclub to my chain."

He was very friendly. "Chain-chain-chain. Just like the song."

She nodded. "Exactly. I got a place in Atlanta called Easy, this'll be Easy Two."

"Easy To. Let's just have a look." He leaned forward and attacked his computer keyboard. Something impressive came up. His face was very clear on that.

Dally was cool. "So I want to buy up a place used to be called the Night Flight Cafe." She tossed me a look. God bless her.

The bank guy shook his head. He'd never heard of it.

"River Street."

He looked at his screen again. "You got enough here to buy and build anywhere you want to." He looked up. "How can I help?"

"Got some construction people over in Tifton, believe it or not, that are gonna give me a deal too good to pass up. You're associated with Tifton Home Loan. I want to put some of the money there."

"Yes, ma'am. We're a parent company now, but I'll bet we could find some boys here in town that could give you just as good a deal."

"Free lumber, minimum-wage labor, no outside contractors. Also"—she dropped her voice, very conspiratorially—"all licenses for the work, including plumbing and electrical, are free."

He sat back, lowered his voice too. "Okay, you're right. We can't beat that." He was less enthusiastic than he had been a minute earlier. He was thinking: How does somebody get a deal like that? He was thinking: organized crime. It might as well have been written on his face. I tried to look tough, to support the illusion.

Dally forged on. "You don't know a guy there in Tifton by the name of Lowe Acree, do you?"

"Sure." But he was tight-lipped. Apparently knowing that this had something to do with Lowe Acree only confirmed his suspicions, because he had quit looking at his computer or making eye contact with either one of us. "Uh, Ms. Felton would probably be the one to help you with all this. She's our real estate expert and she's the one that works most closely with Mr. Acree."

After a second Dally had to ask. "Could you point her out?"

He tipped his head to the left and we saw Ms. Felton at her desk. I stood as much like a gangster as I could manage, hands folded in front of me. It was kind of fun, playing the hood. Dally smiled. We moved on.

As we were walking over, I whispered in Dally's ear, "Ten to one you've just had a recent phone conversation with this Ms. Felton."

She kept her eyes ahead, nodded. "No bet."

When we approached her, Ms. Felton smiled. I smiled back. It was like she'd been expecting us to come on over. Dally sat without being invited.

"How may I help you all?"

Dally spoke in a voice lower and slower than her normal musical tones. "Your cohort over there just told us you were the one to see about some real estate and some connecting funds in Tifton with a Lowe Acree."

"Oh." Ms. Felton was very small all of a sudden.

"Something wrong?"

She hesitated. "I don't know that I'm the one to tell you all this. Did you know Mr. Acree well?"

"Just on the phone."

"Well." She was a little relieved. "He's . . . passed on."

Dally was sympathetic. "Really. I'm sorry. Is Lydia all right?"

She brightened again. "Oh, you know Lydia?"

"Better than Lowe. I'm an Oglethorpe."

This seemed to make Ms. Felton very much more comfortable. "Oh. An Oglethorpe. I thought your voice sounded familiar. Are you close to the family here in Savannah?"

"Naw. I'm in Atlanta. Still, it's a shock: Lowe."

She agreed. "It's a shock." Ms. Felton lowered her voice. "They say somebody killed him."

Dally went into mother mode. "Oh, Lydia must be beside herself. Is she out there at the house, do you know?"

Ms. Felton nodded, but she didn't make eye contact. "I believe she'd probably be at home, but I don't really know."

Dally looked out the window. "How do I get there from here, I'm all turned around. It's, what—north on . . ."

Ms. Felton nodded again. ". . . Main till you get to Peoples, then, you know, right on Habersham."

"That's right. Well." She stood. "I'm Dalliance, and this is my associate, Mr. Tucker. He may be following up for me on the real estate and money details, but I think I need to see if Lydia's all right before I can concentrate on anything else. You understand."

She understood. "You go right ahead. I'll . . . check with Jimmy." And she gave the guy we'd just spoken to a little look. What she'd check I had no idea.

We waved good-bye and were out the door so quick that the heat of the day took my breath away. "Well, that was weird. And, if I may say so, that's some pretty good bluffing for an amateur."

She patted my arm. "Not really a bluff. For one thing, the rich *always* live north."

"Still—must have been a pretty impressive amount in the account to make young Jimmy that nervous. I think he felt you were connected."

She shrugged. "Money talks."

"No it doesn't. It just bullies people around."

She wasn't buying. "Whatever. It gets the job done."

"But it's rude."

"What do you care?"

I opened her car door for her. "I'm polite. I don't like to see any sort of rude behavior. It worries me."

# 16

## *Impatiens*

We headed in a northerly direction. I didn't remotely expect to find Lydia at home in her palatial estate, but Dally loves to look over the playpens of the idle rich. Habersham Drive was no trouble to find; Number One Habersham was even easier: had a big sign in Deco lettering over the gate.

We turned in; up the long, tree-lined drive. A guy in very nice casual dress, with a drink in his hand, met us outside the front door. Before the motor was off, he was sticking his other hand in to shake with Dally.

"You must be Dalliance Oglethorpe."

Dally was cordial enough. "I must be. This is my associate, Flap Tucker."

The casual guy was very glad to meet me too. "Ms. Felton phoned to say you were on your way. We've been worried sick about Lydia."

I got out of the passenger side without any help from the casual guy, but Dally wasn't so lucky. He was all over her: opening her door, squiring her elbow, all manner of very Southern Gentlemanly Behavior. It was okay by me, but she felt a little hemmed in by it, I could tell.

I spoke up. "Ms. Felton just called you?"

He waved his drink a little carelessly. "To let us know you were on the way."

Dally took a polite step away from him. "So is she in? Lydia?"

The casual guy seemed confused. "In? What do you mean . . . here?" He blinked like he was trying to understand another language. "No." He took a quick glance to the house. "We thought *you* knew where she was. Aren't you the detectives from Atlanta?"

So much for any further bluffing. I piped up again. "I'm a licensed private investigator. Ms. Oglethorpe is a businessperson. She's a proprietress."

He was still confused. "You mean that rigamarol about a new nightclub on River Street—that's true?"

She nodded. "You bet."

"And you don't know where Lydia is?"

"Nope."

He was getting funnier. "And you actually thought she was here?"

I had to chime in. "Could we take all this from the top? We didn't think she was here, but we've got to check everything. Plus, we could use a little information from the parents."

It took him a second, but he relaxed. "Of course. Would you come in?"

The house was big and white and old, with a staircase in the entrance room big enough for Rhett to ride a brace of Tennessee Walkers up and down all day long. Everything looked like it was meant as a set piece, not a real thing. That's the way a lot of rich people like it: like nobody really lived there.

The place was also lousy with portraiture, mostly relatives, by the titles, but without a trace of family resemblance to one another. I took a shine to one just above the staircase underpass. It was of a young, blond, winsome woman, once again vaguely familiar; as far as I could tell something roughly like the face I'd seen in the newspaper photo at June's bar.

I took a shot. "That's Lydia?"

The casual guy had to look to make sure. "No. It's an antique, but it *does* look like her, doesn't it? Quite the belle. I think it was painted by Winslow Homer."

I wasn't impressed. "Homer didn't do portraits."

He misunderstood. "I'm not that fond of it either."

We followed him into the kitchen. There was a woman around his age sitting at the breakfast table. She was in a crisp striped shirt and white, white slacks. The room looked out some pretty impressive French doors that opened onto a patio, and the outside was wild with impatiens. Now there's a flower: grows in the shade; blooms like crazy; reseeds itself if you let it, and the winter's not too rough.

I couldn't resist. "Nice spread of impatiens."

She didn't even look. "All volunteers. We think they were planted at the turn of the century originally." They were huge, mostly purple.

The casual guy was a little less than patient himself. "This is my wife, Eugenia."

I nodded. "Flap Tucker."

She nodded right back. "Where's Lydia?"

I liked that: right to the point. "Do you think she might be on Tybee?"

They didn't agree, I could tell. Eugenia was very clear. "She wouldn't go back there."

Her husband was still interested, at least. "What makes you think that she's there?"

I shrugged. "A hunch."

He looked at his wife. "But they also thought she might be *here*."

The wife got a laugh out of that. "So you don't really know anything?"

I looked at the tabletop. "May I sit?"

She tossed her right hand; I took it as assent, and grabbed a chair. "Ms. Habersham, I've been doing this kind of work for a great many years now. I don't feel a need to tell you my life story, but I know what I'm doing. Whenever I look for something, I find it. It's just that simple. Right now I'm only looking for your daughter in order to find some other people. When, and I say *when* I find her, she may want to get lost again. Happens that way sometimes. If she killed her husband, that's neither here nor there to me. All I'm asked to do is find two boys from Beautiful. They're here in Savannah, or out on Tybee, because of your daughter. They want to help her. Once I find the boys, I tell their daddy where they are. Then I'm done. So I'm only looking for Lydia because she's hooked up with the Turner twins. Okay?"

That was end of my speech. It seemed to make Mrs. Habersham feel better, somehow. But the Mister was a little different. He wanted more.

"If you find Lydia, you'll bring her to us."

I looked out at the impatiens. "Not if she doesn't care to come."

He set his drink down on the table a little louder than he needed to. "I'm not suggesting that she'd have an option."

Dally stepped in. "We thought we were bein' pretty cool with everybody. How'd you know we were 'the detectives from Atlanta'?"

Mr. Habersham didn't look at Dally, but he finally answered her. "Ms. Felton and . . ."

Mrs. Habersham filled in. ". . . Jimmy . . ."

He went on. ". . . from the bank . . . they're not as stupid as you might think. And they have Caller ID. They knew the supposed call from Lydia and somebody at the marina had actually come from the DeSoto. They just called back and checked your room and found out your names. They were also a little suspicious about Ms. Oglethorpe's . . . business plan." He finally looked at her. "You're not really going to build a new nightclub on River Street."

Dally just smiled. "It'll be done by Christmas . . . St. Patrick's Day at the latest." She can be as tough as she wants to be.

He turned back to me. "Then there was the earlier call from June over at the DeSoto Lounge. She's a great friend of Lydia's. She wanted to let us know that Mr. Tucker was on the job. She doesn't care for us much. She wanted us to know she knew more about our daughter than we did. She thinks you'll find her—I don't know why." He gathered his thoughts. I was pretty sure he'd been drinking all day. "I think that brings us up to date, more or less. Now, shall we discuss the terms of your employment?"

I adjusted my chair. "I already have a client. Not to mention that the police in Tifton feel I'm already getting in their way. I can't do what ten people tell me to do."

Dally amplified. "In the words of the immortal Otis Redding."

I nodded. "So, thank you for your generous offer, and perhaps we could work together in the future sometime, but I regret that, for the moment, I must take a pass on your current offer of employment."

Mrs. Habersham sank. "You won't help us?"

Mr. Habersham steeled. "He's just bargaining. He wants money."

I had to disagree. "I've got everything I could ever want. It's not the money. Mr. Turner over in Beautiful seems like a great guy, and I want to help. Anyway"—I looked at Dally—"I only take work if *Ms. Oglethorpe* asks me to."

He snapped his eyes on Dally. "So you're the business manager."

She was growing impatient. It seemed to be a theme. "Look, I've got a list of people I'm keepin' informed about Mr. Tucker's progress in this matter. You want to be on the list, it won't cost a dime—unless it's a long-distance call, then I'll reverse the charges. Otherwise I'll let you know just like everybody else. It's a courtesy. Mr. Tucker is very big on courtesy—aren't you, Flap."

"Yes, ma'am." I smiled.

This only seemed to make Mr. Habersham madder. "You look here—"

I interrupted. "You're worried about your little girl. If it's any consolation, everybody I've met so far seems to feel the same way. Can you see that Mr. Turner is worried about his sons the same way? Not to mention Tommy the policeman, who's worried about his cousin that got dead. Everybody's worried about family—everybody but me. I don't really think about my family all that much—with the possible exception of a bizarre array of unfortunates who inhabit Ms. Oglethorpe's joint in Atlanta. So excuse me if I don't quite *get* the family thing. All I'm out to do is find two boys. If, in the course of human events, I find your daughter by and by, I'll let her know you're worried. How about that? Then, if she feels like it, Ms. Oglethorpe will be in touch. That's as good as it's going to get." I stood, mostly for punctuation.

He couldn't decide whether to keep his mad on or go with the situation. His wife helped. She was very quiet. "Thank you, Mr. Tucker. We'd appreciate that."

Manners do count for something. Mr. Habersham looked down. "Mr. Tucker, we've not always been the perfect parents. We're not currently the perfect parents." He picked up his drink again. I'd decided it was scotch. "We'll never be the perfect parents. Not for her. Lydia is a very strange girl."

The Missus was worried about it, too, but she tried to make light. "We often imagine she was exchanged at birth for a human child."

No one took it as the joke she'd meant it to be.

Dally couldn't resist. "She's a creature of the sea."

Mr. Habersham resumed. "As a child in Charleston she was always at the beach. She didn't care about school or boys or clubs or anything important. She couldn't do anything right. When she was old enough, she was always out on the ocean. She never wanted our help. She always earned her own way. After she took up that *job*, we hardly saw her." Sip. He'd said *job* like it was a communicable disease. "We shouldn't have let her marry."

The mother picked up. "She met that Lowe Acree and he was the first man who went out of his way to be nice to her, and it turned her head—turned our heads, too, I suppose. She married him in one big whirl."

Dally couldn't resist. "Marry in haste, repent in leisure."

The Mister ignored it. "She's not like other people. She's like a little fragile doll." He took a sip and looked at the impatiens. "And she didn't kill anyone, by the way. She's not capable."

In a lot of fathers that assessment would have come off like a com-

pliment to their little girls. This one sounded like an indictment. Like it was just one more thing his kid couldn't do right.

Mrs. Habersham wound things up for us. "So—thank you again for your offer. We'd like very much to be kept informed."

*Informed* seemed to me a cold word for the situation. But I guess this *is* the Information Age.

Dally shot out her hand to the man. "Then you'll be hearing from me soon."

And that was it. Our little visit to Tara was finished. Mr. Habersham showed us to the door. He didn't say good-bye.

As we were pulling out the gate, I looked back over my shoulder at the huge house. "They don't seem all that much like parents, do they?"

"How would you know?"

"They didn't seem odd to you?"

"A little, but how do you mean?"

"More like . . . keepers than parents."

She shrugged. "Lots of parents seem like jailers, especially to their children—don't they?"

I turned back forward again; shrugged. "Maybe you're right. How would I know what lots of parents are supposed to seem like?"

I was thinking about my grandmother filling up a shopping cart with forty-three boxes of Bon Ami.

# 17

## *Frim Fram Sauce*

We were back on Tybee and, well within the hour, walking down the beach toward our dinner. We were practically alone on the beach, except for a fat tourist in a white tank top and black shorts wading in the waves behind us.

Dally was examining my intuitions. "So what's your hunch here, pal?"

I was happy to supply. "For no good reason, I got the idea there's some *one* thing that makes all this go around. Could it have something to do with drugs?"

"What?" She stopped walking. "You think all this has something to do with drugs?"

"I know it's a cliché."

"Worse. It's a mundane cliché."

"I can't help it. I've had this hunch since I left Atlanta."

"How come?"

"I had a brief talk with our local pharmaceutical distributor."

"The guy that interrupted my swordfish?"

I nodded. "That's the guy."

She was skeptical. "There's got to be more to your hunch than *that*."

I kept right on. "Well, there were the jumpy kids that popped me on the highway."

"The bold, hick highwaymen."

"Uh-huh, and one of them seemed *very* hopped up on bennies."

She had to laugh. "*Hopped up on bennies?* In what decade?"

I ignored. "Then there was the dead banker who wanted Turner land for a *chemical* dump—"

"Hold it. What?"

"Did I forget to mention that?"

She looked away. "Chemical dump."

I went on. "Then, Lydia was missing for days and nobody knew why, and one of the theories floating around town about that was some sort of Cuban drug connection."

"Where'd you get *that*?"

"From June, your turncoat friend."

"She's not a turncoat, she's got dual citizenship."

"What?"

"She's loyal to more than one flag at a time. She's my pal, but she obviously has some feeling for Lydia."

"At least."

"So what's the drug deal?"

"I don't know. But Horace, that's the guy with the curbside drugstore outside my window, he told me about the new thrill."

"Which is?"

"A little concoction known as Homicide: skag, coke, *and,* get this, some kind of seasickness medication."

She squinted. "I think I heard something about it on the news. S'posed to make you really nuts; violent."

"There you are."

"So you're implying that Lowe Acree . . ."

". . . and, you know, maybe even his cousin Tommy . . ."

She stopped again. ". . . the cop?"

"Right."

"You're saying they wanted the Turner land in order to dump *those* chemicals?"

I shook my head. "Well, I don't know. Maybe they don't want to dump anything. Maybe they just wanted privacy for whatever it is they *were* doing. When you mention the phrase *chemical dump,* most people are going to stay far away. I get the impression that the land's pretty secluded anyway—so whatever goes on out there can stay a secret as long as it wants to."

"And how exactly is Lydia involved in this bizarre scenario you've invented?"

"I didn't invent it—I intuited it." But my shoulders sagged. "Though it doesn't really seem all that likely, does it?"

"Not really."

"Not really."

She thought on. "Could it have something to do with the bank connections? I don't know . . . money laundering?" She looked out to sea again. "Or what if it's something else—something really weird? Like this Lydia really is something out of this world."

I shrugged. "You can get that feeling, but it's just that everybody tries to keep this odd envelope of protection around her. She's the connection between all the players, *that's* the truth. So maybe she *is* that one thing that I'm looking for."

Dally nodded. "You're always telling me that the simplest answer is the best."

I nodded slowly. "Most of the time."

"So maybe it's just as simple as this: She *did* kill her husband, she's nuts, and everybody's just watching out for her because she can't do it herself. You're so paranoid sometimes, you think there's some sort of bigger conspiracy behind everything. Maybe this is just a small-town murder and a perfectly acceptable brand of Southern madness."

It was all sand castles. When you dope out a situation like this, pardon the expression, you have to be prone to wild speculation for a while. It helps to define the parameters. In point of fact we had no idea what we were talking about. So we walked a little way then without gabbing.

The old paranoia nerve *was* acting up on me, though—maybe because Dally'd brought it up. The guy in black trunks and a white tank top had been walking with us a little too long for coincidence, in my book. By the time we were at the other end of the island, I started to turn around and ask him a few choice questions, but then he just walked on by us like we weren't even there.

I relaxed, and then my stomach started asking all kinds of questions about dinner.

I was peering into the clump of buildings. "Which one is the restaurant?"

Dally just headed in. "Smell."

I did, but once you're at the ocean, it all smells like that to me.

She followed her nose, and before I could object, we were at the door of The Hut.

I guess we were a little early for dinner. The place was nearly

empty. A sandy-headed kid took us right to a booth that looked out at the ocean.

I didn't sit. "We have to be in Tina's station."

The kid smiled. "I know. June called. Made a reservation in y'all's name. Tucker, right?"

Dally nodded. "How'd you know it was us?"

She eyeballed me. "She said watch out for a man to come up from the beach in a suit an' tie. I took a shot."

We sat. The booth was cozy. Before we could even take in the view, Tina was at our side.

"Hey. Momma said ya'll'd be here 'bout now. Already got you some scallops cookin'. How 'bout a salad or an appetizer?"

Dally sighed. "I'd better get some cold shrimp."

She agreed. "I think you better."

I was more trouble. "What are the appetizers?"

She was easy. "Got just whatcha want. It's some little fillets of shark wrapped around some smoked mussels; lightly sautéed in a basil champagne. Five or six on the plate. It'll kill you."

I smiled. "I may never get another chance to be killed by a shark. I'm not much of a swimmer."

She nodded, humoring me. "Well, then." And she was gone like a shot.

Then, before I could even worry about what to drink, Tina was back with two glasses of red wine. She set them on the table like they were the crown jewels.

"I know you said you didn't want nobody else drinkin' this stuff, but Momma figured you wouldn't mind sharin' with Ms. Oglethorpe."

I couldn't believe it. "This is my Simard?"

"Uh, it's your red wine, yes, sir. Momma sent it over. Is that all right?"

I took a sip. It was indeed my stuff. "This may be the best service I've ever had at a seafood joint anywhere in the world."

She smiled. "I thought it was white wine was for fish."

I set her straight. "*Wine* is only red . . . and French. Everything else is just deluding itself."

"Okay." She winked. Some waitresses can pull it off. She was one. "I'll check on your appetizers." And she was gone.

Dally appreciated the wine. "Is this the '83?"

"Your palate's getting better."

"The '86 is good, but it's not this . . ."

". . . polished . . ."

". . . or somethin'."

I sat back. "I'm happy."

She set her glass down and looked out the window. "So, let me get right to the point: Do you just *think* the boys are here because that's what some people are telling us, or did you do your thing?"

She never liked to talk about it, even though it was the basis for the work she got me. I have a gift. I got it when I was a kid. Some kids can sing, and some can play ball; some turn to petty crime or drugs if they have a talent for that sort of thing. Me, I've got a trick. It's one of the reasons I'm so good at what I do. In short here's the deal: You sit quiet enough for long enough and breathe the right way and don't disturb the images that come to you—a little like trying to catch a big bass in a small pond—and then you can see everything. I mean everything in the universe that you want to know. First you see a kind of golden curtain, and sometimes the images play in front of it, like a performance, like the play in God's mind. If you can leave them alone, they tell you everything. Maybe I'm not explaining it well. I see the whole of the thing, like pieces of a puzzle, and the puzzle drops into place; I know where the missing thing is, and I can find it. I did it first when I was just a kid, looking for something important to Dally. She lost a ring that meant something to her, and I found it. After that I knew I could do it every time. It's not a substitute for getting out in the great wide world and asking the right questions and seeing the wrong people. It's in the middle of everything else. That doesn't really explain anything, I know. If I could say it in any better words, it still wouldn't be the real thing anyway. You can't communicate this kind of thing in words.

I think that's what shakes Dally up the most about it. She really loves to talk, and I don't talk about it all that much. It makes most people nervous. Even makes some want to shove me in the nuthouse. But I'm not nuts. Ask anybody. All *I* am is quirky.

So I kept my answer short. "Nope. Haven't yet."

We were rescued from further exploration of the subject by the swift and certain delivery of our appetizers.

Tina was very proud. "Best seafood on the East Coast, right here." And she slid the plates in front of us.

Mine was like a little work of modern art: the tight cuts of rolled fillet arranged around the parsley and mussels in the middle, festive chives everywhere. Dally had a glass cup of mammoth cold shrimp still in their shells and another champagne glass filled with red sauce.

Tina beamed. "I'll just get you all some bread."

Dally piped up. "Maybe a bottle of spring water?"

"Quebelle?"

"Fine."

She shot away.

Dally popped open one of her prizes and dipped it up to her fingers in the sauce. I tried to keep up with her, and swirled one of my little morsels in the sauce on the plate and popped it into my mouth.

She reacted. "Jeez. This sauce is *hot*. Must be the horseradish. But man, these shrimps are fresh. How's yours?"

"Great. A little sweeter than I thought it would be. I guess it's the champagne sauce. Frim fram sauce."

She squinted, like she couldn't concentrate. "What?"

I was a little vague too. " 'Frim Fram Sauce'—it was the song on the B-side of Nat 'King' Cole's single of 'Route 66.' Makes the shark more like a kind of coquilles Saint Jacques kind of thing. The sauce is really . . . strong."

I took one more bite; Dally scooped up another dollop of hot sauce with a shrimp—and we were both unconscious in the next split second, like a ton of bricks, like babies falling asleep. Out like lights. Blink. The old seafood mickey. And that's when the real strangeness began.

# 18

## *A Wide, Wide Sea*

When I woke up, I felt like I'd been run over by a team of Clydesdales—and the beer wagon they'd been dragging behind them. There was the sensation that somebody was jabbing a golden spear into my eyes, but it turned out to be the sun through the blinds. I was in a little room smaller than my galley kitchen back home, on a cot that folded down from the wall. It took me a minute to realize it wasn't me that was dizzy, it was the room.

The room was pitching up and down. I only had to concentrate another five minutes or so to realize this had something to do with the fact that I was on a boat.

I tried to get my bearings. I shook my head. On the little table beside me there was an old book, *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*—I used to have one just like it when I was a kid. I started to pick it up. Then there was a rumble of thunder outside, or maybe it was in my head. This was some unbelievable drug hangover.

Just as I was trying to get up off the bunk, somebody came into the room.

"Hey. You 'wake?"

I wasn't sure. "Maybe."

"How you feel?"

"How long have I been out?"

"All night."

"What time is it?"

"After noon."

My eyes focused. On the cot across from me was a big boy in his late twenties. He was plain and smiling; seemed familiar.

He patted my leg. "You'll be okay."

I withheld my judgment. "What happened?"

"Whatcha mean?"

"I mean how come I'm on a boat with you instead of at dinner with . . . where's Dally?"

"That lady you's with?"

I lurched up. He stiff-armed me in the sternum, knocked the breath out of me. It was casual. He meant no harm. I sat back. I was in no shape to go a round with this guy. I nodded. "Yeah, the lady. Where is she?"

"Back at her hotel room. She's fine. Prob'ly just gettin' up too."

"What'd you use to knock us out?"

"On you? Bovine tranquilizer."

I felt like it. "You didn't use this stuff on Dally?"

He grinned. "Naw. We just used some sleepin' pills on her. Daddy gets to where he can't sleep so good? And the doctor give 'im some pills. We let her have five and some alcohol. She be just fine, really. And we didn't give you all that much of the tranquilizer either. Me an' Peachy both taken it once, just to see what it was like." He crossed his legs and looked right at me. "If you jus' take a little? It's very relaxing."

I tried to focus my eyes. "I'm a little too relaxed right at the moment."

"It'll wear off. Wanna go swimmin'? That helps."

"We're on a boat, right?"

"Yup."

"Where?"

"On the ocean."

"Right. Where?"

He looked toward the window. "I don't know, exactly. Honest."

I sat up and really tried to get some eye contact. "So you've got to be Maytag Turner."

He was very happy about it. "Yup."

"Where'd you get a name like that?"

"Aunt Ida said when I was born, I was big as a warshin' machine."

"And your brother?"

"Not as big."

"No, I mean—how'd he get 'Peachy'?"

He rolled his head. "Ohhhh. He was second? And when he come out, Ida asked Momma was he as much trouble as I was? She said no, he was just peachy."

"It's a good story." A little lighthearted considering it might have been the last words their mother spoke.

He was willing to play along. "How 'bout 'Flap'? That's a name."

I dropped the chitchat. "You know my name. You knew where to find me to knock me out. What's the story?"

"We know all about you. Daddy told us you was comin'. We called him yesterday."

"So your daddy knows where you are?"

"Not exactly. But he knows we're okay. We don't really like to worry him."

I nodded. "He seemed kind of sickly."

The kid got serious. "He's been thataway since I can remember."

"Farming. It's hard work."

He agreed. Then he brightened again. "Wanna go up on top?"

"Uh-huh." I shoved myself up from the cot and he caught my arm. We navigated up the little stairs together.

On deck the light was so blinding, even though the sky was overcast and looked like it could rain any second, I had to close my eyes completely. Somebody plopped a cap on my head and put some sunglasses in my hand. I must have looked pretty silly in my rumpled suit and my John Deere cap, but I didn't care. Even with the cap and the Ray-Bans, I could barely see.

When my pupils finally closed a little, I could tell there was another kid at the rail with a big deep-sea fishing pole in his hands.

He craned backward. "Hey, Mr. Tucker. How's you head?"

I waved. Pays to be friendly. "Feels like a cow."

He laughed. Maytag brought me something to drink, a Coke, maybe, and I sat down on one of the hatches. The boat wasn't huge, but big enough to handle six people very comfortably. It looked like any other charter fishing boat.

Maytag called out to his brother. "Catchin' anything?"

"Naw."

"Then come have a little talk with Mr. Tucker."

He set his pole in a lock at the top of the rail in front of him, and clomped over to us.

He threw his hand at me. "Peachy Turner."

I shook his hand. "That would have been my guess."

He sat. "Daddy hired you to find us?"

"Uh-huh. Looks like I earned my dough. Here you are."

They both thought that was pretty funny. I was wishing I had a way to check on Dally, see if she was okay. They must have seen something in my face.

Maytag shook his head. "We got nothin' against you, Mr. Tucker. We just wanted to . . . talk."

"Then how come the mickey in the seafood? How'd you do it, by the way?"

Maytag volunteered. "The bovine tranquilizer's a liquid, went into your sauce real easy. Not much taste, but it's a little sweet."

"I noticed."

"Uh-huh. Daddy's sleepin' pills is real bitter, though. So we had to spice up the lady's sauce pretty good."

I looked out to sea. No land anywhere. "Tina was in on it?"

Peachy nodded. "Tina and June both."

"Why?" At the moment that's all I wanted to know.

Maytag settled back and folded his arms in front of him. "Lydia."

I waited for more, but there was none. It was as if he'd made an eloquent speech. He was satisfied with it. I had to have more. "What about her?"

Peachy put his hand over his mouth, just like a grammar school kid thinking of the answer to a math problem. Then: "Lydia is not like anybody else in this world. We've been knowing her for a good while on Tybee. When you meet 'er? It's like meetin' a wild creature or a angel or a . . ." But he was at the end of his field of reference.

Maytag had to take over. "She don't talk like nobody else, she don't move like nobody else. She ain't"—he leaned in and lowered his voice—"we don't think she's human."

I was clearly skeptical. "Uh-huh. So you like her."

This gave them a laugh. Peachy made it clear. "Everybody likes her. Why you think you're here with us now? Nobody meets 'er that don't like 'er."

I pulled back. "Except her husband."

That got things quiet. It took a minute for Maytag to form his words. "Lowe Acree . . . is one of those men—and I'd say there's a lots of 'em now days, but Lowe's one of the worst—that's bent on wreckin' up the world. He wanted money and stuff and he didn't give a damn how he got it. Lydia was just somethin' else in his treasure chest."

Peachy was on fire with this idea now. "Like you hear there's a lotsa rich men that buys up old pitchers and pays a million dollars for 'em and they don't really care to look at 'em or nothin'? It's just a investment to them. Beautiful paintin's they never even look at." The way he said *investment* seemed to me the closest Peachy Turner ever got to cursing.

Maytag helped me out. "We went to the High Museum in Atlanta on a school trip once? They got a lot of paintin's there."

Off in the distance, there was a little more thunder, and the sky was getting darker.

Peachy squinted hard. "If Lowe Acree had one of those pretty things? He'd just put it in a vault somewheres, never look at it, never let nobody else look at it, just see how much could he get for it. That's not good."

I was sympathetic. "Plus, he wanted some land of yours."

Maytag spit. "He didn't want no land. He wanted a place to dump poison. He wanted a garbage can. We don't own one a them." Then he grinned at his brother.

I ignored it. "So you wouldn't sell."

Peachy smiled, back to his friendly self. "Not really, no."

I pressed. "And he got all bent outta shape."

Maytag nodded. "He got right mad about it."

"And you all had an argument in his office and it got outta hand."

Peachy smiled even bigger. "He called us retarded."

I nodded. "And it made you mad right back at him."

Maytag shook his head slowly, surprised. "Lotsa people calls us retarded. They don't mean nothin' by it."

Peachy filled me in. "We're not retarded."

Maytag agreed. "We're just simple."

Peachy sat back. "It's a gift to be simple."

Maytag patted his brother's leg. "It's the secret a life."

Peachy agreed. "Life is very easy, Mr. Tucker. Most people don't realize it, but it is."

Maytag looked out on the water, then at me. "Life is nothin' more or less than a little bubble on th' ocean. It comes up, it gets some sun on it, then it pops and goes back in the sea. That's all there is to it."

Peachy shook his head, sorry for everybody alive but himself and his kin. "So why in the world does everybody want to get so riled up about it?"

And for a second everything was still and calm on the ocean and in the air, the sun came out hard from behind a cloud, and I saw the

world through their eyes. I'd have to say it was a place I could have lived, but the moment passed. Then, before I could pursue my line of thinking about the death of one Lowe Acree, there was a big splash near the boat.

Maytag jumped up. "We got somethin'!"

He ran to the rail, reared back on his pole at nearly a forty-five-degree angle from the deck. Peachy sat with me, smiling at his brother.

I straightened my hat. "Thanks for the brim."

He nodded. "Gotta keep the sun off."

"Peachy?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why am I here?"

He turned to me, very serious. "You gotta help us. We can't find Lydia and we're worried just sick about her. She's a very strange person and a lot of people don't understand her the way we do. We didn't see no need in your wastin' time lookin' for us: we're right here. So now all you gotta do is find Lydia. Okay?"

He returned his attention to his brother. Maytag was making fair progress collecting fishing line on his reel. Something big was at the other end. In spite of myself, and my desire to know what was what, I had to go see.

I lumbered up, and shoved myself over to the rail. The line was straight and tight, right into the sea. After a second the fish jumped up.

"Swordfish!" Peachy was beside himself. "Man-oh-man, I *love* me some swordfish."

Maytag looked over at me, very calmly under the circumstances. "It's great on the grill."

After another twenty or thirty minutes, there was a swordfish on the deck of our boat. Peachy popped a hatch and we all slid the thing down into a huge refrigerated hold. We were all pretty happy with ourselves, it had taken all three of us to get the thing in. I thought it was about a hundred and twenty feet long, but maybe I overestimated a little.

The boys popped open some beers, and then, without the slightest ceremony, reached into the cooler and slipped out a freezing, opened bottle of the Château Simard.

Maytag handed it over, with a plastic cup. "You had this at Tina's. She said you'd want it. I guess it was already paid for. We tried to get it nice an' cold for you."

True enough, there was ice on the bottle. I smiled. Their intentions were so good, I decided to spare them my usual wine rant. "Thanks."

Peachy was very happy. "Drink up."

I popped the cork, poured a full plastic cup, and we all toasted our catch. I had to get back to what I thought was really important. "I'm worried about Dally."

They nodded. Maytag patted my arm. "Wanna call 'er? We got a phone."

I must have lurched. I nearly spilled some of my stuff. "Yeah, I wanna call 'er."

Peachy disappeared below and came back ten seconds later with a cell phone. He handed it right to me. "Mash the code on the front first, then the motel."

I looked out to sea. "Don't know the motel number."

Maytag slugged back his beer. "Check the right coat pocket there, Mr. Turner. I believe you got some matches from the lounge." He looked down. "Sorry. We had to check your pockets."

Check for *what* we didn't get into. I looked; there they were: DeSoto Beach Motel Lounge matches. I dialed.

The desk answered. "DeSoto Beach Motel."

"Would you mind giving me Room Twenty-seven, please?"

"Surely."

There was a long series of ringing noises before she answered. "Uh-huh."

"Dally?"

She was immediately more alert. "Flap? Where are you?"

"On a boat out at sea—with the Turner twins."

"What?"

I shifted ears. "Yeah. How do you like that?"

"Not much, right at the moment. Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm recovering from an overdose of bovine tranquilizer."

She still wasn't quite awake. "What happened to us?"

"We got slipped a mickey, as they say in the movies."

"Cow tranquilizer?"

"That's what I got. You got sleeping pills."

"Lucky me."

"Indeed."

"I kinda remember you goin' out before me . . . but I couldn't . . ." She yawned. "Did you say you're with the Turner twins?"

"Yup. They're the ones who popped us."

"Why?"

I looked at them. They were watching me, smiling. "I don't know. They say they want me to help 'em find Lydia."

"Oh." There was a rustling of sheets, like she was sitting up. "Flap?" There was a long pause. She was thinking, trying to clear her head. "There's something more about this deal that I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure about it, and I didn't know whether you'd wanna help, given that I know how you feel about family stuff and all, and it's not *just* Sally and Dally and J. D. Turner and the magnificent tapping aunt and the twins who don't look like twins . . ."

She was talking wacky. "Sugar, you're not awake yet."

"I know, but I gotta try an' tell you what's goin' on."

I could be patient. "Okay, tell me."

But she didn't get a chance. There was a crack of lightning, and more thunder, and the sky got darker all of a sudden, and the phone went dead.

I looked at the thing. "Damn."

Peachy looked around. "Lost your connection. It's a storm comin' up good. We best get on in."

Both boys got up and went to work. I tried a couple of times to redial, but there was nothing but static.

# 19

## *Bleak House*

The rain came. The boys seemed to know what to do, and there wasn't much I had to offer in the way of help. So I let nature take its course. Its course seemed to take me where it wanted me to go anyway. That's a little lesson in the great Tao. I can't remember who said it, but the quote is, "Destiny leads those who will follow—and drags those who will not."

Whoever said it, I got the point: You're going whether you want to or not. You can walk along your path pleasantly enough, or you can go kicking and screaming. Either way, you'll end up in the same place when the day is done.

Anyway that's the way my thoughts were going when we pulled into a little dock under the black afternoon sky. There was nothing there but the dock and a path that curved into invisibility in the woods.

Peachy was tying up. "I believe that cold storage'll keep my fish all right. Reckon?"

I looked at him. "I dunno."

Maytag stepped onto the dock. "Whose fish, now?"

Peachy hopped. "You comin', Mr. Tucker?"

They both stood still, waiting for me to move. Was it just a bizarre trick of the light, or did these two look more like Pevus Arnold and

Ronnie Tibadeau than they had out on the ocean? Whatever. Everybody's related to everybody else one way or the other.

I skipped off the boat. They both turned and headed up the path. I guess if I'd had the gumption, I could have zipped back on board, cast off, and set the boat west, hoping to bump into Georgia. I figured we were on Ossabaw or Cumberland or some smaller island off the coast. I couldn't help but hit the continent if I just headed west.

But the boys were my object. They were the prize. I was getting paid to find them—didn't seem right to try hard to lose them now. So I pulled my coat collar up around my neck to keep the rain out—and followed along the path.

After about five minutes or so we came to a very nice little house. It was all glass and exposed beams, a post–Frank Lloyd Wright job from the fifties or so. It was built right into the nature all around it, the kind of shack that probably had a name like Mandalay or Bleak House.

"Keen digs."

Peachy turned around. "Hmm?"

"I like the house."

"Oh. It don't belong to us."

Maytag was more helpful. "It's one that belongs to the Habershams or somebody else rich, and Lydia stayed here awhile. We thought we might find her here. It's where she'd usually come. But she ain't." He was doing his best to explain. "Here, I mean."

Peachy was opening up the front door. It wasn't locked. "This is where we called Daddy from first, but we didn't talk long."

Maytag nodded. "We seen that TV show where they trace the calls."

I nodded. "Yeah. I love that show." I had no idea what he was talking about.

We were in a neat living area with a stone fireplace and studied folk antiques. Maytag patted my shoulder and talked to me like I was a kid. "You hungry?"

I hadn't thought about it. "As a matter of fact."

He headed for the kitchen. You could see it around the edge of the hearth. "I believe we got some barbecue left. You like barbecue?"

"By the fifth or by the rib?"

He was baffled. "We just got sammiches."

I plopped down in a heavy overstuffed chair. "Okay."

Peachy came over to me. "You're kinda tired."

"Uh-huh."

"Takes awhile for the stuff to wear off." He patted my shoulder too. "Sorry."

Maytag was back in a hurry with the food; handed it to me: two big sandwiches, potato salad, slaw, and beans on a paper plate. All cold. All unbelievably edible. I think I had the first sandwich done before either brother sat down.

Peachy was laughing. "That bovine tranquilizer makes you hungry, too, don' it?"

I nodded, but I was too busy with the slaw to completely answer.

He settled in. His brother was beside him. There was a very pleasant sound of rain on the roof. Otherwise they watched me eat in silence.

Finally Maytag spoke. "So you met Aunt Ida. Daddy said she tried to tell you everything."

I talked around a forkful of beans. "That's quite a system she's got."

Peachy smiled. "You mean the tappin' an' whatnot?"

I nodded.

Maytag shifted into a slouch. "She makes herself known."

I nodded again. "It was interesting. She born mute?"

Peachy looked over at his brother. "Tell 'im."

Maytag closed his eyes. "Naw. You."

Peachy settled in. "Okay. You done eatin'?"

I looked down. The plate was entirely clean, like nothing had ever been there. "Unless I eat the plate—which I might. Why?"

"I get you somethin' else, or you can listen to the story."

I set the plate aside. "Maybe I can get something more in a minute. I'm always willing to take a story break."

Peachy agreed. "Okay."

He set the stage with silence and the drumming of the rain. It was the perfect curtain raiser. Then he let loose with his story.

# 20

## *A Kiss in the Cemetery*

In their younger days Aunt Ida and her sister were growing up in Savannah. Their father was away in the Navy fighting World War II. He'd promised to return, but the rumor was that his ship had been lost at sea.

Every day the girls walked home from school by a cemetery. The cemetery had gravestones from the Revolutionary War. It was very old.

One day in October Ida's sister was kept after for whispering in class, and had to clean erasers. She'd been whispering to a little cloth-and-wood doll that she kept in her pocket—something her father had given her before he'd gone—and the teacher had caught her and punished her.

Ida waited on the school steps. The day got dark and evening was drawing on. Still, the girls had to play their special game. Every day on their way home from school, they played a game of Dare. People said it was because their father was gone that they were growing up contrary. Nevertheless, challenges were issued in their game. One girl had to run through the Old Baptist Cemetery and touch the back door of the church without making a sound. No screaming allowed. That was the strictest rule: no noise. They didn't want to be caught and get in trouble.

Ida's sister was in a bad mood from her punishment, and she issued

a particularly mean challenge that day: Skip through the graveyard, kiss the back door of the church, do a dance on the steps, and then run back—here was the hardest part—jumping over any open graves on the way out. Finally: kiss the little wooden doll. Then they could go home.

Ida was equal to the task, loathe as she was to being called a sissy little girl. She set her books down in the twilight and skipped into the old churchyard. She was very proud of the way she seemed so unafraid, but the cool air and the shadows made the place stranger than ever before.

Arriving at the back door of the church, Ida kissed it, looked to her sister and waved, then danced the new dance they'd seen on television, called the Twist. It made her laugh, and her sister, way off at the street, was laughing too.

Ida spotted an open grave, and determined to leap over it on her triumphal egress. She took a deep breath and headed straight for it, running as fast as she could.

But just as she came to the edge of it, something gray and huge raised up out of the open grave and made a horrible sound. Ida leaped up over it; she was too close to do anything else. But she stumbled on the other side, tripped over a magnolia root, and came down on the ground hard, smashing her head on a carved stone angel at the foot of the next grave site. She lay unconscious. Her sister stood screaming from the street.

Up out of the hole, the poor old man who took care of the place threw himself. He had just finished digging the new grave after a day of planting pansies all around the church.

He was crying. He thought the little girl was dead. He just stood over her saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Finally someone came out of the church, and Ida's sister rushed in. They all stood around Ida, afraid to even touch her. The old man said he'd been working when he heard a noise that frightened him. Something flew over his head, and he thought it might be a giant bat. The little girl never made a sound.

Ida's sister stood whispering frantically to the little doll.

Then, in the next moment, Ida opened her eyes. She sat up and smiled. Everyone thanked God. The old man picked her up in his arms and carried her home, with her sister leading the way.

And despite everything medical science could do, Ida kept right on playing the game for the rest of her days: running through the graveyard of her life without making a sound.

From that day on she never spoke another word.

# 21

## *Promises*

Just in case I was confused, Maytag thought he ought to clarify. "See, that's our Aunt Ida and our Momma. The sister was Momma. Momma used to tell everybody after that happened that she and Ida was one person—half that could talk and half that couldn't."

I nodded. "Right."

Peachy sat back. "Momma always felt guilty, they say. Said it was her doin' that made 'em so late, the whole thing was her fault. She felt sad and sorry and tried to give Ida all kinds of help, you know. They were near inseparable after that night. They did everything together." He gave his brother a very meaningful look, I thought. "Everything."

Maytag continued. "It was what Daddy called a *traumatic event*. See, in the full daylight it ain't so bad, but it's real spooky in the evenin'. We been there. We seen the angel."

Peachy smiled. "Angel that took Ida's voice."

I sat back. "Right. And she started tapping and clicking after that?"

Maytag answered. "Not right away. Took awhile."

Peachy had a theory. "I believe it was seein' that old movie about Macaroni that did it."

I didn't understand right away. "Macaroni?"

He nodded. "That invented the telegraph."

I smiled. "Oh, yeah. *Marconi.*"

He was amiable. "Whatever."

"Your aunt saw some movie about Marconi and decided to . . . it's not Morse code she uses?"

"Naw, it's all Ida."

I should have known better, but I had to ask again. "How did you all learn it?"

Maytag volunteered. "We read her mind, most times. We just let 'er tap so she'll feel like she's expressin' herself."

I nodded, trying hard not to think about it too much. "Right. You all read her mind."

Peachy yawned. "We're a close family."

"Uh-huh."

Maytag swatted at his brother. "Mr. Tucker ain't got no normal family. It ain't polite to lord it over 'im."

Peachy closed his eyes. "Oh. Sorry." Then he opened them. "Sorry, Mr. Tucker."

I shrugged. "It's okay. What makes you think I've got no normal family?"

Maytag thought that was pretty good. "Shoot. If you had a family like ours, you'd have a lots a better things to do than run around lookin' for *us*. You got the look of a fella that's unattached."

I settled back again. "Well—I read a lot about how nonattachment is supposed to be enlightening."

Peachy looked at his brother, on the verge of a small satori himself. "Maybe it's like how it is with us an' Momma." He looked at me. "Lots a people thinks we oughta be sad about her dyin'? But we ain't that much attached to her memory an' all."

Maytag looked at me. "We never spent a minute worryin' about—or wishin' Momma had of lived. She didn't. That's all there is to that. Anyway, Ida's been pretty clear with us—ever since we was little-bitty—about what happens to you after you die."

I crossed my arms. "Okay, I'll bite. What happens to you after you die?"

He opened up his hand and showed me his palm. Then he smiled. It was the famous peace that passeth understanding. You get it in nearly all of your better religions.

I nodded. "I see." But maybe I didn't.

The rain was drawing to a conclusion, and it changed the mood in the room. There was even a little low golden light coming in the kitchen window.

Peachy sighed. "I love this time a day."

Maytag leaned over to me. "So, Mr. Tucker—you gonna help us find Lydia or not?"

"Did she kill her husband?"

Peachy drew in a big breath through his nose. "We don't really know. She whispered somethin' in his ear, and after he had time to think about it, he just fell over."

Maytag agreed. "Just like in the storybook we got her for Christmas."

Peachy smiled. "It was a book with English and Irish stories in it. Lots of folks hereabouts got all kinds of Irish and English in us. That one story's about this spirit of the ocean? And she falls in love with a rich man on the land."

Maytag shook his head. "But it don't work out between 'em."

Peachy nodded. "She just whispered a word in his ear, and he fell right over."

I couldn't tell if they were talking about the story they'd read, or what had happened in the bank in Tifton.

Maytag shifted comfortably. "They tell us he was dead after that. Reckon he got to thinkin' about how bad he'd been—*that's* probably what killed 'im." He stared at nothing for a beat or two. "So how you gonna find 'er, Mr. Turner?"

Peachy was interested too. "What exactly does a person in your line of work actually *do*?"

I looked out at the golden kitchen. "Often I use the same method that I so successfully employed to find the two of *you*."

Peachy blinked. "What was that?"

"I let *you* come to *me*."

Maytag agreed. "That's a way to do it."

Peachy nodded his head slowly. "Take 'er easy." But he seemed distracted for a second.

Maytag looked around strangely, too, and then he hoisted himself up. "I'm goin' to bed."

I checked my watch. "It's not even seven."

He didn't look back at me. "We didn't sleep last night."

Peachy looked over at his brother and nodded. "You got a nice long sleep, but we didn't sleep at all."

I tightened my lips. "Yeah. I had it lucky." Something was up with them, but I couldn't tell what it was.

Maytag was headed up the stairs. "You could try to call your lady friend again."

Peachy followed. "Make you a bed there on the sofa."

Maytag disappeared around the top of the steps. "See you later."

Peachy looked back. "Or, I reckon you could watch the TV an' all. It gets all kinds of channels." He paused a moment on the top step. "So you gonna help us? We really gotta find her in the worstest way."

"I'll do what I can." There. I'd said it. Now I actually had to do something about it.

I guess it was good enough for him; he understood the nature of the promise. He was gone too. The idea I'd had in the back of my head about being kidnapped for some sinister reason by lunatic farmer boys was evaporating pretty quickly. I really could have split then if I'd wanted to—plenty of evening light left in the long summer day. But I'd made my promise, so I stuck to it. I never *think* making a promise like that will get me into trouble, but it usually does.

# 22

## *Boom*

I reached for the phone; dialed.

The answer: "DeSoto Beach Motel."

"Twenty-seven."

Pause.

"Hello?"

"Dally, it's me again."

She was anxious. "Flap. What happened? You okay?"

"Started storming, that's all. We got cut off. I'm great."

"Except for the fact that you got some kinda god-awful drug in you and you're kidnapped by retarded farm boys."

"They're not retarded, they're simple. They were very clear on that issue."

"Are they listening?"

I settled back in my chair. "They're asleep."

"So . . . if you wanted to, could you leave now?"

"Yup."

"But you're stayin'?"

"Uh-huh."

She sounded more relieved. "So you really are okay."

"I really am okay."

She let out a big breath. "Good."

"So what's all this frantic talk about something strange with our current investigation? You were talking maybe a little crazy before."

"What?"

"Before you hung up, you were wild to tell me something about all this business that you hadn't told me before."

"Oh. Yeah. Prob'ly just the drugs."

"So, you're not going to tell me now?"

"You're really okay? I mean—they're not holding a gat on you or anything?"

"Gat?"

"You heard me."

"No. No gats, no roscoes, no equalizers, no persuaders, no blue steel babies."

"Plus," she shifted the phone, "no guns, right?"

I had to laugh. "Yeah, no guns. So come on, tell me the deal."

"I don't want to now."

I couldn't believe it. "What?"

"If you really are okay, I'd rather wait until I see you in person. Which'll be *when*, by the way?"

"I dunno. I gotta help the boys find Lydia now."

"Why?"

"That's what they want me to do, and I'm inclined to do it."

"Oh." But she wanted to say more, I could tell.

"So you're not going to tell me what's up?"

Silence.

"Dally?"

More silence. Then: "Flap, you gotta talk to me before you go lookin' for Lydia, okay?"

I shifted the phone. "What for?"

She was stubborn. "Sorry."

"Be sorry all you want; tell me what's going on."

"In the words of the immortal Marvin Gaye."

"Stop it."

"You'll be mad."

"I won't be mad."

"Yes you will."

I shifted the phone again; leaned forward. "Dally, this is absolutely and uncharacteristically . . . excuse my language: *feminine* of you. It's making me nervous. I've got enough yang in my diet."

"I see no reason to insult me with this *yang* talk. And by the way, God forbid I should seem *feminine* to you."

"Who is this?"

"What?"

"Who am I talking to?" I leaned farther forward.

Pause. She spoke softer. "I know. I'm sorry. The hangover from these pills is makin' me a little wacky. How many'd they give me, you know?"

"They said five."

"What was it?"

"They didn't say that part. Some prescription from their father."

She got even softer. "I'm worried about you and I'm . . . talkin' all wrong."

I relaxed a little too. "*You're* talking wrong? I got a cow in my head."

"So."

"So, you're really not going to tell me any more right now . . . so, okay."

She spoke very softly. "Just . . . this all might have something to do with *your* past."

"*My* past?"

"Maybe it does, and maybe it doesn't. That's all I'm gonna say till I see you face-to-face—you big lug."

I smiled. When Dalliance doesn't want to talk, she doesn't. "Big lug?"

"In keeping with the *gat* and *roscoe* motif."

"Ah."

And *boom* there was a noise in the kitchen the size of the Fourth of July. I nearly dropped the phone.

Dally heard it over the receiver. "What the *hell* was that?"

"Shhh." I put the phone down.

Glass breaking, big pops, snarling voices, running—something big bashing at the door: it had all the jolly earmarks of a bust.

I quick turned on more lights so that they could see me really well, and put both my hands up on my head; stood very still. In an ear-busting crack the door was kindling, and five or six guys imitating the cops they'd seen on television came savaging in, growling and hustling to beat the band.

Flashlights were all over me, even though they didn't need them. Big fat *angry* guys were yelling at me to stand still, get down, put my hands on my head, put my hands behind my back, answer questions, shut up—all manner of oxymorons. And I use the term advisedly.

"Lie flat on the floor and stand still!" My favorite.

I didn't want to be a smart guy, but around these goons I didn't have a choice. "Which is it, lie down or stand still?"

"Shut up!"

I did. Several were still pointing their guns at me. Most were running up the stairs, yelling. In my experience you only yelled like that when you were scared. I didn't mean to be hard on the guys. Being a cop was tough, and if you had any sense, you'd *better* be scared most of the time. But these guys were playing cops. As I was saying, I blamed television.

"Nobody else in the house!"

That got me. Where had those Turner boys gotten off to?

Somebody came in the remains of the front door. He was moving slow, so I was guessing he was older, or in charge—or just didn't watch as much TV as the rest of the merry band.

I couldn't see him well because of the light in my face, but the voice was familiar.

"So, Mr. Tucker. Where have those Turner boys gotten off to?"

I squinted. "Hey, Tommy? That's you?"

"Detective Acree."

"Uh-huh."

"Where are the boys?"

"They went up to bed about two minutes ago."

He hollered, "Nobody in the bedrooms?"

Pause. Then: "No, sir! The house is empty."

I couldn't resist. "Except . . . for me."

Tommy wasn't all that impressed with my humor. "We know those boys got you out of The Hut. We know they drugged you and kidnapped you. What we don't know is why."

The light was really getting to me. "Oh, there's a lot more you don't know. You don't know where the boys are now, for instance. And you're mistaken about the kidnapping. I'm here of my own free will. As to the drug thing, I've been having a little trouble sleeping lately, and they gave me a sedative, that's all."

He was still calm, which surprised me. "We saw them cart you out of the restaurant. They poisoned you. It might've killed you."

"Naw. Just got a good night's sleep."

He pushed. "On a boat."

"You know I think that did help matters, come to think of it. The rocking motion on a boat is very soothing."

"They dragged you out of The Hut like a sack a potatoes. They carried Ms. Oglethorpe to her room and took you on a boat. I'm tryin'

to give you a break, Mr. Tucker. I'm willin' to believe you're a victim or a dupe of these criminals. But if you like, I can treat you as an accomplice."

"Accomplice to what?"

He was plain. "The murder of Lowe Acree."

I smiled. "Except for the fact that there's not a shred of what we call *evidence* in the police game. By the way, I'm having the body exhumed." I thought it was a good bluff—see what it would get me. "Your cousin died of an aneurysm."

He finally lost his cool, which had been my goal. "Now you're a doctor?" He swatted at one of the cops standing next to him. "Get those flashlights off him!" He whirled back at me. "Sit down and shut up. You'll be *president* before you get an order to exhume my cousin's body."

The lights went out of my face; I sat back down in my chair. The phone was still off the hook.

I raised my voice. "So, Detective Acree—where are we, exactly? The boys were a little fuzzy on the geography. I was guessing Cumberland."

But he was in no mood to give out information. He looked at the cop he'd just swatted. "If he talks any more, shoot him in the head with a really big gun."

The boy nodded smartly. "Yes, sir."

Tommy was off, lumbering up the stairs. I looked at the cop standing there beside me. I smiled and whispered at him. "He was just kiddin'—about that really-big-gun thing."

The kid didn't see the humor. That's my doom: Nobody thinks I'm as funny as I do. I decided to try to give Dally as much information as I could before somebody hung up the phone.

I looked at the kid. "Swell house, huh."

He didn't answer.

I looked around. "I don't think the Turner twins own it, though."

He rolled his eyes.

My suspicion was that he was just out of high school. He was a small-town assistant deputy who spent most of his day doing what he was told.

I yawned. "I think this house is owned by Lydia Habersham."

"I don't really think I should be talkin' to you."

"Okay."

He yawned.

Tommy saved us from further scintillating conversation. From the

top of the stairs he called out to me. "Mr. Tucker? Would you mind joining us up here?"

I looked at the kid. I didn't want to make any sudden moves around him. He might just have had a really big gun handy. Besides, I've taken to making funny noises when I get up out of my chair these days. I'm pretty sure they're the same noises my father used to make. I didn't want to startle the assistant deputy.

He nodded. I got up. He took my arm, like we were going to the prom, and we both started up the staircase. I glanced at the phone, still off the hook. "Okay. Upstairs." I was hoping Dally was getting all this.

Tommy had disappeared into one of the rooms. "In here."

I followed. It was a nice place: antique white, faintly gold, Lincoln bed, hook rug; a marble-topped table supported an ancient wash bowl and pitcher. The bed was messed up but still fresh, crisp. Somebody had laid down, and got right back up, like they wanted to make it look slept in.

Tommy leaned on the foot of the bed. "Which one slept here?"

"I don't know. This is my first visit to the second floor. We only just got here. By the way, have you had a guy following me since I left Tifton?"

He nodded. "Just about. You're some detective. Didn't even notice a cheap amateur tail."

I shrugged. "The tail picked me up in Savannah. Nobody was following me on the drive over those little roads coming here."

He stood straight. "Didn't have to be. Ronnie Tibadeau put a pulse emitter under your chassis. It was real cheap. I bought parts and made it myself. I'm a kind of Saturday inventor."

"Ronnie Tibadeau put a bug in my car?"

"Oh, he's too stupid to know what he was doing. I told him it was something you'd asked for, in case you got lost. He'll do anything I tell him. Used to kind of work for Lowe. Plus, as you may have noticed, he's about a dumb as the law allows."

"They got a law about that in Tifton?"

He ignored me. "So you really don't know whose room this is?"

"Nope. I just met the boys. I just got to the house. I'm still cranky from the cow juice. *And* I'm kicking myself for not paying attention when I get paranoid."

"Oh, so now you're trying to say you *did* notice the tail."

"I'm *trying* to say I wish I were home in bed."

"Yeah, well I wish you were too. You're complicating the situation here."

I looked around the room. "I've got certain talents. I could actually be of some help to you."

He smiled and shook his head. "I've heard about some of those so-called talents, Mr. Tucker. We have no need of hocus-pocus on this investigation."

I thought about it for a second. "How would you have heard anything about me?"

He looked away. I couldn't tell if it was because he didn't want me to see his face or he didn't care. "Sally Arnold."

She wouldn't know, but I didn't want to get into a thing with the guy. He might get the idea I'm the sort that likes to get into things, and then where would I be?

He turned around to face me. "I'm going to send you back to your hotel room now, and I wish you'd pack and return to Atlanta with Ms. Oglethorpe."

I shrugged. "Dally's got business here. She's starting a club on River Street. She'll be staying for a while."

"Is that right?"

"She's not just a fine person, she's an entrepreneur."

He looked right past me to the kid who'd escorted me up the stairs. "Take him back to the DeSoto. Wait for us in town. You know where." He said it like a spy thing.

The kid hesitated. "Uh . . . in-town-Tybee or in-town-Savannah?"

Tommy sighed, his spy lingo blown. "At the place in Savannah."

The kid was anxious to leave then. "Right, right." He grabbed my arm and started out, but I stood my ground and he slipped a little on the hook rug.

I fixed on Tommy. "I still have work to do here, Detective Acree."

He was wry. "You found the boys. Call it a day."

I shook my head. "I've still got to find Lydia."

He got stranger. "No, you don't."

"I promised."

"I don't care if you *promised*. Who'd you promise? The twins?"

"Look, if I said I was going do it, I've got to do it. It's a *thing* with me. It's like a sickness."

He looked at the kid again—seriously mad at that point. "Take him back to his room. Watch him pack. Escort him to his car—that's very important—escort him to his car. See that he *leaves town*. Then you can meet us at the place we discussed." He shot me a glance. "Good-bye, Mr. Tucker. I got to catch me some murdering retards, and you have ceased to be amusing."

I saw how things were. I nodded. The kid looked at me now, begging me to just come along with him and not make him look any stupider than he already looked—which would have been going some. I shrugged. It's a good expression. The French do it a lot. When I caught myself doing it, I started thinking maybe there was something to this heritage thing after all.

On the way out I checked again—but somebody had hung up the phone by then.

# 23

## *The Golden Code*

The ride back to Tybee in the police boat was swell. It was just me, the driver, and the kid. Nobody wanted to talk, so I had time to reflect. The sun was getting fresh with the western horizon —the sky was blushing red and pink. I was worried about all manner of things, but the sunset was working on me. I was thinking how a long, slow, summer sunset was just the ticket. I was watching the water. I was thinking about my childhood—something I never do. Why was the idea of *that* scratching at the back of my neck?

We docked just as the last of the light was gone. I never got from anybody what island we'd been on. The kid looked at me like I was a wicked messenger—the personification of bad news.

"You ain't gonna need the cuffs, Mr. Tucker, huh?"

I smiled. "What am I going to need cuffs for?"

He was relieved. We got to a police car; he slammed me into the front seat, a friendly touch. We drove without talking any more, straight to the motel. I waited for him to get out and open my door, like we were dating in high school.

Up the stairs I stopped at the door.

He sighed. "You ain't got the key?"

I smiled again. "Just don't want to surprise Ms. Oglethorpe. She may be indisposed."

He nodded, quick. "Right, right."

I tapped on the door. No answer. I tried again. Nothing. I reached into my pocket and hauled out the key. I popped the lock, cracked the door, peeped in.

"Dally?"

Still no answer. One of the lamps was on, and underneath it was a notepad with some writing on it. I stepped in and headed for it before the kid could get a look.

It was a note from Dally:

> *Gone Over Loading Dock. Everything's Negotiable.*
> *Come. Urgent: Remember Tell Aunt Ida Now.*
>
> *D.O.*
> *P.S. After all that, we need to talk about the other stuff,*
> *Or maybe by then you'll know.*

I had to laugh out loud. The kid snatched the note and read it himself. He didn't see the humor.

"What's funny?"

I took the note back from him. "I'm just glad she's okay; back to work and all."

But the truth was: Using a code as ridiculous as the first letter in every word of the message, and capitalized at that, to tell me what she thought I ought to do —that was pretty funny indeed. Even the kid could have figured it out. But if he had, *Golden Curtain* wouldn't have meant anything to him anyway. The whole deal was her corny little joke. Dally loved the spy talk. Not the James Bond, more the John le Carré. Spy talk is largely for people who'd like to think their lives are more interesting than they actually are. In Dally's case, however, it was always a comedy routine: talking in pig Latin like it was a secret language; leaving notes like this one. Once she just about slayed me faking a distraction so that she could slip an extra pack of sugar in my coffee, like it was a mickey. I couldn't stop laughing. It was when we were in high school, before the world got old. But I reminisce.

So why did she do it? Why did she leave me a note like that one? She could have just said, "Do the Golden Curtain thing, then we'll talk." Nobody but I would have known what she was talking about anyway. She wanted me to think about the sugar-pack mickey. She wanted me to think about goofy covert activity, like Detective Acree

and his secret rendezvous place that the kid had messed up. She wanted me to think about the past—my past.

Why? I had no idea. And why did she sign it with her initials? Why sign it at all? She was the only one in the room who'd be leaving me a note, and I knew her handwriting as well as my own. I considered it just might have been her penchant for a good story, but for some reason I got the idea it was a little more urgent than that. I mean, it said, "DO."

I looked at the kid. "Look, you're a youngster, and you've got energy to burn, but me, I'm getting past my prime and I need a minute to rest up from my hectic day. I've been drugged, kidnapped, busted, lied to, and hustled outta town. I need a little time to lie down, change clothes; freshen up before I drive back to Atlanta. Okay? You can wait right out here in this nice little room. I won't be more than half an hour, forty-five minutes. Then I'll pack and be outta your hair. If you hear the slightest noise that bothers you, come busting in on me with your really big gun quick as you please. What do you say?"

He hesitated, peered into the bedroom to make sure there wasn't an exit door, looked at the window to see was it locked, looked out at the ocean from the nice big bay window where he was standing.

"An' after that you'll leave nice?"

I nodded. "I've just got to have a break."

He thought about it one more minute. "Okay, then."

He crossed his arms, kept standing, and watched me walk into the bedroom and close the door. He was a good kid after all.

I couldn't figure why Dally thought it was so important for me to do my thing right that second. But she did, and I was bound to go along with it. She knew what she was doing —nearly all the time.

I took a moment or two so as to splash a little water around and change the old outfit. Then I sat on the edge of the bed looking out at the sea. This little trick of mine, it's not so particular, really. I'd like to think nearly anybody could do it if they'd give it half the chance. It's probably nothing more than a way to relax enough to let your mind tell you the stuff it's been trying to tell you all day but you've been too busy to listen. So you have to be quiet and relax.

You stare out. If you're lucky enough to be at the beach, you stare out at the ocean. You breathe in, you breathe out. You see how your breathing is like the sound of the waves. You see how your breath and the waves and the whole wide world are all pretty much the same thing. After a while, there's nothing but the breathing. That's the touchy part. You can't make it happen. You just have to let it happen.

If it does, you can't congratulate yourself: "Look, I got a vision!" That's the last thing you want to do. It goes away if you do that. It goes away if you mess with it at all. But if you're quiet, and if you're still, it comes to you easy, like breathing out and breathing in.

And there it was, a kind of gold fog. Dimly at first, I could see people walking back and forth through it. Lots of people. They were all greeting one another in a very friendly fashion. They were all families. It was a family reunion. Old friends, old acquaintances, distant relatives, new babies—everybody was there, sitting around tables, eating fried chicken.

At one table were the Turner twins and their family, Ida tapping out a complicated rhythm with her knife and fork. Next to them was Pevus Arnold and a woman I took to be his wife, a little like a plump Joseph and Mary; Sally Arnold hovering over them with more fried chicken.

At the far end of the yard Dally was waving me over. She was at a table with Lydia. I still couldn't see her face, but I could tell it was her from the wispy blond hair drifting all around her like the light of grace.

From a distance she waved, and said, "Hello, Flap. Good to see you again."

Then, sneaking around the corner of the church, I saw two young girls—I had the impression they were sisters. They were playing with a doll—a magic doll that could talk. They held it up, and one girl said, "Say hello to Lydia."

Then, from behind me I heard another voice. I turned around. It was Horace the curbside drug tradesman from Atlanta. I nodded. He seemed to want something from me.

He was motioning me over to the graveyard by the church. It was dark and filled with open graves and magnolia trees. Lowe Acree was popping up out of one of the graves, like a strange repeated act at a carnival haunted house. Lydia was standing by a stone angel, laughing and laughing and laughing.

After a minute she and Horace went to Lowe's graveside. Lowe smiled and slid back down in the grave. Horace wandered off in a northerly direction. Lydia ran over to the Turner table, laid on it face-down, and pretended to be swimming.

I came over to stop her, since no one else seemed able to do it. When I got there, still with her face turned away, she said, "Hello, Flap. Good to see you again."

The voice sounded so familiar, it set me spinning.

# 24

## *Songs of Shakespeare*

I was startled from my reverie. The kid in the other room had gotten impatient. Apparently he'd knocked quietly on the door, but when I'm in the middle of my trick, I can't hear much unless it's really loud.

He'd slipped open the door, caught sight of the back of my head, tiptoed in to tell me it was time to go, and seen me staring blankly out to sea.

He was shaking me like a rag doll. "Mr. Tucker! Mr. Tucker!"

I blinked; sighed. He stopped shaking me. I squinted at him. "A simple 'wake up' would suffice."

He was pretty well flustered. "You was asleep? You sleep with your eyes open?"

I rubbed my face. "Sorta."

"Well . . . Lordy, mister." I could still see the panic on his face.

I had no sympathy. "You woke me up out of a kind of important dream."

"I thought you was dead." He leaned back against the windowsill.

"I wasn't." I bobbed up out of the chair. "So. Guess I better pack."

I got all my stuff together in a hurry. He watched, still a little shaky. I finished, straightened my tie, hoisted my coat over my shoulder like Sinatra, and smiled at him.

"Guess we'll leave Ms. Oglethorpe's stuff to her."

He nodded.

I started out. "I gotta stop by the bar. Gotta pick up my potables."

"Huh?"

"My comestibles."

"Mr. Tucker . . ."

"I've got some bottles in the bar downstairs that I'm not leaving behind." I opened the door to the room. "Coming?"

He sighed like it was the end of the world, and we headed downstairs. June wasn't busy.

She eyed me, then the kid, then me again. "Hey, Taylor."

The kid looked down. "Hey, Ms. June."

She looked at me. "What can I do for you, Mr. Tucker?"

"You could lay off telling my fortune, quit recommending places for dinner, and give me what's left of my Château Simard."

She looked down. "I did it for Lydia, you know."

I softened. "I know. My wine."

She nodded. "Got about a bottle and a half left here. Twins give you what was left from last night over at The Hut?"

"Yeah. And I'd like not to cart around an open bottle of spirits. It's against the law, they tell me, and Taylor here is an officer in law enforcement. So maybe you could pop the cork on the half bottle and help me finish it up. Kind of a farewell-no-hard-feelings sorta thing."

She liked that. "Dally was right. You're a character."

I heaved myself onto the closest barstool. "That's me. In fact I'm a character in the play in God's mind. Did you know that, June? Just like you. Just like all of us. We can't help it."

She bent over to get the bottles, paying me absolutely no mind.

I looked at Taylor. "So, can you join us, officer?"

He looked around. "I better not."

I turned back to June. "It's not really *drinking* with this stuff, Taylor. It's more like a conversation."

He didn't understand. I didn't feel like explaining anything to either one of them. I was still a little preoccupied by what I'd seen in my little waking dream. It was rare to get a dream like that. Usually it was just a wadded jumble of images. This was like some dream sequence from a Hitchcock film.

June plopped down a full glass in front of me, slid the other unopened bottle toward me, and hoisted her own half-filled glass in the direction of the framed newspaper story on the bar wall behind her.

"Here's to your little adventure on the coast, Flap."

I looked at the frame behind her too. "And to Lydia. 'Who is Lydia, what is she, that all our swains commend her?' You know that?"

June eyed me. "You think I don't know, but I do. It's 'Sylvia.' It's Shakespeare. It's a song."

Taylor nodded, almost to himself, embarrassed to know. "Schubert set it to music."

I set down my glass to eye them both.

Taylor spoke right up. "We got us a great little school system down this way, Mr. Tucker. We're not so stupid as a lotsa people think."

June winked at him. "Taylor here plays the viola, don't you, hon?"

He looked at his feet, like the answer to her question might be written there. "Yes, ma'am."

I got it. "So you played the Schubert in school band or some such."

"Community orchestra, yes, sir. Uh-huh. It was our *Songs of Shakespeare* show."

June nodded. "Well attended."

He still didn't look up. "For a winter show, yes, ma'am."

I looked at him. "Taylor? You know the churchyards over in Savannah? You know one that would have a stone angel and a lot of magnolia trees?"

He finally looked at me. "Don't know one that *wouldn't* be like that."

"Oh."

June sipped. "Prettiest one to me is the one close over there at River Street." She looked to Taylor for guidance. "That's the Old Baptist?"

He nodded. "It's always been kep' up right nice, all those inpatients in the summer and pansies ever'where in the fall."

There it was, the Old Baptist with the pansies out front. There's no such thing as coincidence.

I knocked back a healthy taste of the Simard. "I'll have to catch it sometime."

June set down her glass. "Look, Flap . . . I'm sorry we had to treat you so bad what with sluggin' you out with my own daughter's food and all. I hope you understand. It's Lydia. I care for her more than you can possibly imagine."

I finished off my wine, swiped up the unopened bottle. "I don't know—I've got a pretty good imagination."

Taylor shifted his weight. "Ready to go, Mr. Tucker?"

"Yup."

We started out, but I couldn't resist the exit music. I popped a quarter in, and mashed good old R2: "Stardust"—for my money, the music of the spheres. It shuffled us out of the lounge with a good bit of class.

# 25

## *Carpenters and Masons*

Out in the parking lot, I tossed my stuff in the backseat of my heap, on the rider's side, and waved at Taylor where he was standing by his cop car. He did not wave back. He was a musician, not a policeman, and the disparity between what he loved and what he did for a living made him impolite. It's a common malady. Most men lead lives of quiet impoliteness.

He shot me a look. "I'm following you to the highway. I'm watching you get on. You're going to Atlanta tonight. You'll be home by midnight. I'll call to make sure."

"That's very thoughtful. I am prone to car trouble."

"Good-bye, Mr. Tucker." I could tell he was trying to sound like Tommy Acree.

The magic of Ronnie Tibadeau was in evidence still. I got cranked the first turn, and my car was rolling. True to his promise, Taylor followed close behind. He was with me up the ramp to the interstate. He followed past the first exit, the second exit. Just when I thought he might tail me halfway to Atlanta, he flashed his lights and roared past me, slipped into a police turnaround in the median, and zoomed away back toward Savannah.

I rolled on to the next stop, got off, pulled into a station; slipped under the car. There it was, plain as day: some cheap, homemade

gizmo. I didn't know whether it was still working or not, but I popped it off anyway. Just for laughs, I slipped it under the bumper of a station wagon with Michigan plates while the owner was paying for his gas.

Then I got in my car and headed back into Savannah to look for an Old Baptist graveyard. June had said the church in question was near River Street. At least I knew where *that* was; that's where I headed. Found a parking place up on the street that overlooked the docks. Just for old times' sake I wandered down onto River Street itself, looking for the ghosts of days gone by.

Sure enough, there was the place where the Night Flight used to be. And inside, there was activity, lights, something happening. I peered in the window. True to her wacky note, there was Dally, ordering some schmo around.

I tapped on the glass, they both looked. Dally came to the door a little quicker than she usually moves, and popped it open.

"Took you long enough to get here."

"I got run outta town by Johnny Law."

"But it didn't take, did it?"

I smiled. "Here I am."

"Well, I guess you better come in and survey the landscape of your past."

"It has been a while. We had a great gig here once upon a time."

She introduced me to the schmo. "This is Homer. He's a cabinetmaker. He apprenticed for twelve years. He's good."

He nodded.

I let him get back to his wandering, and motioned Dally over to a spot where the bar used to be. "Nice note you left me."

She grinned. "Yeah. I thought you'd find it amusing."

"What's the deal?"

She took a deep breath. "Know how you're always mouthin' off about life bein' like a game?"

"Thanks for paying attention. Like a *play*."

"Whatever. I kind of got a dose of it at the moment."

"Sorry. I didn't figure it to be contagious."

"Yeah, well—I'm giddy."

I had no idea what she was getting at. "Okay."

"It all seems a little like a game to me."

"And by *all* you mean . . . ?"

She wouldn't answer me. "You do your thing yet?"

"Yeah. But I didn't finish. I got interrupted before anything made any sense."

"What was it?"

"Family reunion."

She was cagey. "Really."

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"You bet."

"Such as?"

She looked around the room. "You guys played here, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It was a dream gig. A week at the beach, seafood every day, fishing for blue crabs off the peer. And I had a little thing for the assistant manager."

"Is that right?"

"I don't know whether it was *right* or not, but it was swell. She was engaged to the manager, I think, but he was outta town. She was sowing her wild oats. Or would it be sea oats out here?"

"She took advantage of you."

"Oh, yeah."

She smiled. "And it lasted . . . ?"

I nodded. "An entire week. Right after we left town, there was a kind of bad hurricane. Did a lot of damage out on Tybee."

"You never know what kinda damage you leave behind you when you're young, do you?"

I looked at her. She was somewhere else, staring off into space. I hated to bother her—wherever she was—but it was uncharacteristic. "You reminisce."

She came back. "Yeah. I do."

I reached out and got ahold of her elbow. "Well, knock it off. The past, as they say, is only prologue . . . you know."

"Yeah. I know."

"So."

She rallied. "So."

"I gotta find a church graveyard."

She blinked. "Because?"

"Because I have the intuition I'll find the mysterious Lydia there."

"Well, that's a kind of far-fetched notion, don't you think?"

I agreed. "But my notions can fetch pretty far, don't you think?"

She thought for a second. "Okay. Where is it?"

"Around here somewhere. It's tied in with the Turners' Aunt Ida. It's where she lost her voice."

I told her the story. She enjoyed it. I've mentioned how she'll always go for a story.

Homer overheard. "Y'all are talkin' about the *Old* Old Baptist."

I turned to him. "As opposed to . . ."

He smiled. "Just the plain Old Baptist, which, see, it just got built after the Civil War. The *Old* Old Baptist was built before the Revolution."

I looked at Dally. "They got buildings around here that old?"

He was certain. "Yes, sir. That ain't nothin'. See, in America, you get to be old after a hundred years or so. But over there in Europe? Shoot. You gotta be five hundred 'fore they even take you serious. They got a lotsa *old* over there."

I was impressed. "Nice work, Homer. I heard they had a great school system around here."

He was proud. "Ah, most of what I know is from the guy I's apprenticed to. He's from England? He learned it from his great uncle, who learned it from somebody else in the family, and on and on back to Noah."

"Noah?"

He explained it to me. "Yes, sir. Noah? He was a carpenter back in the Bible."

"Yeah, I know who Noah is."

Homer tried to take it all in. "I didn't ever think he was from England, though."

I looked at Dally. "Me either."

Dally encouraged Homer to more talk. "Tell him why you got to apprentice with him, Homer."

"Oh. Well, he ain't got no kids, and no kin that's interested in the work. He's a Mason?"

I didn't get it. "Like a Shriner?"

"Naw. That's his name. He's related to the actor James Mason."

Dally was the only vocal skeptic. "So he tells Homer, anyway."

Homer was undaunted by Dally's cynicism. "Don't matter if it's true. It makes a good story. And he's a great carpenter. Best I ever saw. He knows stuff about buildin' that a lots of people's forgot." Homer squinted. "An' now he's got nobody to pass it on to but me. Ain't none of the rest of his family the least little bit interested in all that know-how." He looked at me. "Don't people over there in England care about the family?"

Like I'd know.

Dally was more practical. "So, which way to the cemetery?"

He motioned us over. "Look." He started drawing us a little map on a yellow pad. "It's just right up there."

He pointed in the direction of the sea.

# 26

## *Poets and Thieves*

It was plenty dark by the time Dally had finished describing the perfect nightclub to Homer. They discussed it, then he left; we locked up and headed toward the graveyard, walking.

The streetlights kept the moon from seeming too bright. It was nearly full. Full moon on the way to the boneyard. You had to admit that the author of the play had a sense of humor.

We arrived. It was well kept and lousy with historical markers in front. Nobody was home. We ambled on around the back. It was darker outside the range of the streetlights and underneath the old live oaks and Spanish moss. Magnolias were nearly solid all around the older part of the digs. The smell of the blossoms was everywhere.

It got to me. "Man. Is magnolia the greatest smell or what?"

She was quiet. "Shhh. How in the world are you gonna find this Lydia if you clump around smellin' the flowers and yakkin'?"

"A lot of people would say that's the best way to find a woman."

"Hush."

We walked around for a good while; found some Revolutionary War heroes, according to the markers. Even after dark the place was steamy hot. After a while we sat down on one of the benches for a breather.

I felt like musing. The full moon and the environs made it seem appropriate. "I ever tell you what happened at Verlaine's funeral?"

She shook her head.

I settled in. "There was a tug-of-war between his publisher and his mistress over who was going to get his winding-sheet. During the ruckus a man named Louis Ai stole fourteen umbrellas. That's what the French newspapers said when they were writing Verlaine's obituary."

"Umbrellas?"

"The mourners at the funeral had left a bunch of them leaning against a tree."

She nodded. "Know what *umbrella* means? It's from the Latin *umbra,* meaning 'shadow'; the diminutive is *umbelia*, meaning 'the little shadow.' So I guess you're not the only font of knowledge in *this* couple."

I smiled. "I guess not."

Then, quietly: "Why bring up Verlaine?"

I shrugged. "A—a great French poet. B—pals with Rimbaud—"

She interrupted. ". . . until Verlaine gets him in some fight and Verlaine goes to jail over it."

I ignored. "C—converted to Catholicism in jail, so you know he's *serious*. D—ideal Symbolist poet."

"So you bring him up because . . ."

I nodded. ". . . he's a major figure in nineteenth-century literature."

She took it all in. "I see. Know what happened at my grandmother's funeral?"

"Okay, what?"

"They had a drawing and gave away a door prize."

"Really."

"Trip to Bermuda."

"I hear it's a paradise on earth."

She eyed me. "It is. That was the symbolism. We're lousy with symbolists in our family, too, so shove the fancy talk. Honestly. You got way too much free time."

"Okay."

We sat in silence for a minute or two. The fireflies were like sparklers. Finally she shifted in her seat. "How do you spell his name?"

"V-e-r—"

"No, not the poet, the umbrella thief."

"A-i."

"That's it? A-i?"

"Yup."

"The way you pronounced it, I thought it was . . . what's the French word for 'garlic'?"

"A-i-l."

"Yeah. I thought the guy's last name was 'garlic.' A name like that could turn anybody to a life of crime. Louey Garlic."

I was willing to play. "Yeah, what you name a kid is liable to cause trouble, but you'd think it'd be some kind of culinary crime."

She nodded. "Never can tell what makes a man steal fourteen umbrellas."

I was settling in. "Funny, you know? Some guys are remembered because they wrote great, beautiful words that'll mean something to somebody for a long time—and some are remembered because they stood next to some poet's funeral and stole umbrellas."

And without any kind of warning, there was a voice right behind us.

"Hey, Mr. Tucker."

I was around so fast it knocked the bench over, and Dally went grass surfing.

With his hand out, he tried to calm me. "Whoa back there, hoss."

In the dim light from the nearby streetlamps I could barely make out Maytag Turner. Out of the shadows there was another shape. I could only guess it was Peachy.

I straightened up. "Hey, boys."

Dally sat up. "You all must be the Turner twins."

Maytag was over helping her up with a speed and agility I would not have expected.

I looked at Peachy. "He moves fast for a big boy."

Peachy was proud. "Football."

Maytag was modest. "Peachy's the hero. He was always in the end zone for me."

Peachy wouldn't hear of it. "Maytag come bustin' through any line, stand around long as he wanted. Nobody could bring 'im down. Then when he felt like it, he'd toss me the ball."

Maytag nodded. "We were a fine team."

Peachy straightened out the bench. "Sorry to sneak up on you all. Didn't mean to scare nobody. We didn't know for sure it'd be y'all."

Maytag explained. "Coulda been somebody on a date."

Peachy was embarrassed. "We didn't wanna disturb nobody."

Maytag had Dally up. "So we had to sneak. Sorry."

I looked at Dally. "This is Ms. Oglethorpe."

Peachy swatted at my arm. "We know."

Maytag made it clear how dumb I was. "Who else would you be out here with?"

Peachy wanted to clear the air. "Y'all missin' some umbrellas?"

I shook my head. "It was a story."

Maytag nodded. "Oh, yeah. Ms. Oglethorpe likes her a story."

Peachy was ready to move on. "Okee-doke. We can go now."

Maytag came over to me. "I'm glad you remembered us tellin' you about Ida's little adventure. Wanna see the angel?"

"Sure." Why not, you know? Part of the Tao thing is letting it all happen around you.

They took us to a newer part of the yard. It was still dark, but you could see the angel. It almost had a glow, a kind of eerie light.

Maytag leaned over to it. "That moss or lichen that's on it? It's got a kind of a phosphorescence makes it seem kinda like it's glowin' a little, don't it?"

Peachy was a little anxious. "This place gives me the chill bumps. Could we go to a Waffle House or somethin'?"

Maytag looked at me. "We got some talkin' to do."

I agreed. "Yes, we do."

Dally cleared her throat. "Waffle House?"

Peachy shrugged. "Or someplace good. Don't matter. Denny's?"

Dally rolled her eyes. "That's right, boys. Let's go to a well-lit all-night eatery that's a *known* cop hangout. None of the three of you are supposed to be in town, remember? Plus, *two* out of three are supposed to be in jail for *murder*."

Maytag agreed. "Got a point. Where do we go, then?"

Dally smiled. "Too Easy."

# 27

## *The Trouble with Mechanics*

We started on our way back to Dally's new nightclub. I decided I had to go by my car, to get the stuff out and bring it in with me. The boys went on ahead with the key. Dally didn't like them being seen out in plain sight—not with all of us together, especially—but she was impatient. She didn't know why I had to go to the car.

I had facts on my side. "Over fifty percent of all crimes committed in Savannah involve some bum busting in a guy's driver-side window and removing his goods from a car."

She rolled her eyes. "Like anybody's gonna want your crummy stuff."

We sidled up to the vehicle in question. Dally stood on the rider's side, arms folded, tapping her foot like Krupa.

I shoved myself around to the driver's side. There they were. The unmistakable legs of that magic mechanic, Ronnie Tibadeau. He was in evidence, but very still, like I'd seen him before.

"What's up under there now, Ron—more surveillance equipment?"

Dally was confused. "Huh?"

Ronnie, he didn't say a word. In fact he was a whole bunch of stillness. I nudged his leg with my foot. It flopped.

Now she was irritated. "What're you doin', Flap?"

I looked up at her. "Uh, hon, we got us a kind of situation here."

"In what way?"

"Remember I told you about that kid from Tifton named Ronnie Tibadeau, the one who fixed my heap?"

"So?"

I leaned on the car. I was thinking maybe I could just push old Ronnie's legs up under and pretend he wasn't there; drive away unnoticed. "Well, don't panic or anything," I looked down at the ever-so-still pair of legs, "but I think this is him that's dead under my car, here."

She looked for a second like it was some kind of bad joke. Then her head jabbed over to the left and down. When she was facing me again, her eyes were wide. "What have you done?"

"*Me?* I didn't do a thing."

I leaned over, took hold of the ankles, and withdrew the body whence it reposed.

Dally came slowly around the car.

I tightened my lips. "Yup. That's him all right. His head didn't used to be all stove in like that—not when I saw him last. But that's the boy. He's great with cars."

"Pull him on out."

"Love to. Take a look at his right hand."

She didn't want to, but she peeped. His right hand was handcuffed to the chassis. She straightened up. "Well, this has got to be a bit of bad news."

"I'd say so."

"What's your plan?"

"For this? I got no plan. What *can* I do? Those are *real* handcuffs. You can't pick 'em or saw 'em without a whole lot more effort than we got time for out in the open like this—in an area that's *heavily* patrolled."

Her face was pale but she tried for tough. "And what do we do about this, then, Braniac?"

I leaned over. "We sweep him under the rug right now—come back later." And I started stuffing him back under the car.

She didn't watch. "This is so very much not good."

"Yeah. And it's not even *your* car."

She was not remotely amused. "Well, hurry up." And she headed for the club.

I watched her walk away. "Be right there."

I stayed behind to tidy up. Kind of a mistake, in retrospect.

# 28

## *Ronnie's Pals*

I got down on my hands and knees, always a bad idea in any circumstance, and started shoving parts of Ronnie up under the car. I was not happy to hear voices coming my way, and less so when two big old boys stopped to pass the time of night.

"Whatcha got there, mister?"

I tried to block the view. "Just fixing a little mechanical problem with the old auto."

"I don' think so."

"Really?" I craned my neck to see them.

They were fat like wrestlers, packed tight. One was in a tank top far as I could tell in the bad light, and the other was in a kind of shark-skin suit. The suit was talking. "Who's that you're playin' with down there?"

"He's my mechanic."

Tank Top shook his head. "Naw it ain't. Thas' Ronnie Tibadeau. Or used to be, rather."

Great. "You boys know Ronnie?"

Suit smiled. "Somebody sent us over. Said he was in trouble. Looks like it was a little more than he could handle."

Tank Top: "But we're big boys." Big smile to match. "And we're used to trouble."

I straightened up. "Look, guys—he was like this when I got here."

Suit didn't buy. "Uh-huh."

Tank Top took a step closer.

I put my hand on the car door handle with a rushing sense of déjà vu. "Honest, boys. Somebody else put Ronnie up under there. Me and him, we're pals, see?" Big smile back.

No dice. Tank Top headed my way. "Sure."

I whipped open the car door. It'd worked before.

Tank Top heaved up his enormous leg, kicked my car door toward me with a boot big enough to have dinner off of—which might have been his plan for me anyway. The car door made a noise like a battleship going down, and hit me hard over nine tenths of my body. I flew east, then dropped south, all the way to the ground. Suit had somehow levitated to my side and was kicking me in the ribs with some kind of pointy Beatle-boot-looking numbers. Tank Top was laughing hard. All I could do was roll.

After a minute or so they got tired, and I sat up. "Okay. What now?"

Suit had to think. "We tie you up to Ronnie Tibadeau and go for a little drive?"

I shook my head. "Oh, let's not. Ronnie's had a pretty hard day, from the look of it." I tried to stand up, but I couldn't remember how.

Tank Top had an idea. "Let's just take him back to the man and go. I got a party."

I had to ask. "The *man*?"

Tank Top didn't mind answering. "Told us where to find you."

Who'd have known where to find me?

They hoisted me up and started me off down the street. I wasn't much help. I couldn't remember how to walk either.

It was an uneventful stroll under the streetlamps. We turned in at a darkened bed-and-breakfast, up the walk, around the porch to a side entrance, and into a small backroom. It was quite well appointed. I threw myself into a very nice Queen Anne.

But the *man* wasn't there—the guy who'd set these two tops spinning my way. Suit was only mildly irritated, but Tank Top seemed downright uncomfortable.

"I ain't waitin' for him. I gotta go, man. I need a little *help*. You see what I mean."

Anybody who'd ever seen a junkie without a bag would have known what he meant.

Suit was less than sympathetic. "Your own fault, bud. You need to be clean like me."

"I need to be clean like your *mother*."

Suit spoke calmly. "If you talk about our mother that way, I have to *cut* you, so shut up, okay? It's disrespectful." Then he approached me. "Our host, he's not in at the moment."

I tried. "So who *is* our host?"

"Our host must remain . . . anonymous."

For one icy second I had a shot of the *big* fear. The dark forces collided and extinguished every bit of light. I suddenly was afraid that our host was the guy named Lenny that I used to know. I may have mentioned him once or twice—and he was still out there in the darkness . . . somewhere.

I tried to sound cool. "Is it Lenny?"

He was clearly ignorant. "Who?"

"Well, that's a relief." You just don't know.

"The guy that sent us on our little errand is a bad man. He straddles good and evil."

Tank Top had recovered enough to respond. "I hate that kinda talk." He looked right at me. "He reads all these books and it makes him talk . . . funny."

In another light I suppose it could have been a little humorous. So I made bold to ask. "What are you reading?"

"Right now?" Suit put on his thinking cap—to all appearances a seldom-used accessory—and found the answer. "It's about two sisters."

Tank Top was suddenly all kid. "Tell it again."

Without a second of hesitation, like a hood relating the details of a caper, Suit began to tell me and his bro a tale about two sisters and a magic doll.

# 29

## *The Magic Doll*

And Suit's story went as follows:

In a little village by the sea, not so very long ago, there lived two sisters. Their father was a rich sea captain, but his ship had been lost, with all hands, in Baffin Bay, where the whale fishes blow. When they heard this terrible news, the two girls began to grow in a contrary manner. As one grew bright as the sun, so sad as winter grew the other. Veronica became more graceful with each passing day. Susan was filled sorrow.

Now, on the southern-most end of this same coast, in a dense forest never visited by townsfolk or sailors, there lived the mighty witch that everyone called the Sea Hag. She was two hundred years old and had practiced her profession for most of her life. It was widely known that she ate lightning for dinner, and that her snoring could be heard as thunder on a stormy night. She was nearly six feet tall, but so stooped and twisted that her chin nearly scraped the floor when she walked. Her laughter was the sound of peacocks screaming.

So, in the dark and rainy season, in the autumn of the year, there came up a strong wind. It blew all the candles in the house out. On that night Blackeyed Susan grabbed her sister by the arm. "Look what's

happened. All the candles have gone out. What will we do? We'll never have light in this house again. It's dark as the grave."

Veronica strained to see in the darkness. "Can't we just relight the candles?"

Susan was terrified. "No! That would bring down the wrath of the Sea Hag on this house!"

Veronica shivered. "The Sea Hag? What's she got to do with it?"

Susan squinted in the dim room. "She's the mistress of the darkness. Once you've let all the light in your house go out, you have to consult the Sea Hag and beg her for light. If you don't, her revenge will be swift and terrible. She'll burn your house. She'll char your bones. She'll fill your land with salt water. And it's all our fault. Imagine what Father would say! You have to go to the Sea Hag and beg her to let us have more light."

Veronica was terrified. The girls had heard the tales of the Sea Hag all their lives, and knew that no one who had gone in search of her had ever returned. With their father gone to sea, they had no one to turn to in their bitter hour—except the one thing Veronica's father had given her before he left: a tiny wooden doll. The doll was as beautiful as it was strange, and Veronica had always had a feeling of closeness to the doll that she could not explain.

So, that dark night, sobbing, armed only with the doll, the young girl felt her way out of the house and through forbidding undergrowth into the black forest, toward the home of the Sea Hag.

And as she went, she told her troubles to the little doll. "I'm very frightened, and I know I may never see my home or my father or my sister again."

Much to her amazement, for it had never done so before, the doll spoke back. "Do not fear. Keep me hidden away safe in your pocket and no harm will come to you. I will help."

Encouraged by the brave words, Veronica pushed on in her journey all the next day until she came to a clearing, and there it was: the fabled home of the Sea Hag.

Suddenly there was a great swooping noise like a giant bat, and in rode the Sea Hag. "I thought I smelled the blood of a human." She sniffed. "Come out now or I'll char your bones!"

Trembling like a leaf, Veronica stepped out of the shadows.

The Sea Hag grinned, toothless and without mercy. "Ah, a little girl. Come in, child. Come in. You're too skinny to eat, and besides, I've just had a stingray stew. . . . I think I'll go to bed now and eat you when I wake up. Unless . . ."

Veronica summoned all her courage. ". . . unless what?"

The witch was quick to answer. "Sweep and clean my house so it shines like the moon, and prepare me a meal before I awake, and maybe I won't eat you."

Veronica's courage grew. "I'm no stranger to hard work. This sounds easy."

Angered, the Sea Hag lashed out. "Then in addition: Out on the beach there are over one hundred great fish that I've scared ashore. Gather them up, clean them all, and cook them down—and I may let you live another day."

So saying, the witch went to bed, leaving the poor girl staring toward the beach.

In despair, Veronica poured out her predicament to the doll. "I'll never be able to do all this work before she wakes up."

"Never fear," said the doll. "Lie you down and rest. I'll do the work."

Exhausted from fear and her long journey, the girl fell into an eerie, deep slumber. When she awoke the next dawn, she found that her little companion had done every one of the tasks the Sea Hag had commanded: The house was swept, the meal was cooked, and all the fish were prepared.

The girl jumped up, kissed the magic doll, tucked it safely into her pocket, and stood beside the table where the witch's meal was set. Veronica was bright as a new penny.

The Sea Hag lumbered into the room. "Is everything done?" She cast her cloudy eye about the place. "What? Not a speck of dust and all these fish cooked down?" The Hag squinted. "Well, I won't eat you today. I've got evil work to do. I'll be away from the house all day. But when I come back, you must have done an even harder task than the one you seem to have accomplished already."

Veronica only smiled. "I'm equal to any task."

The Hag nodded. "Is that so? In the back of the house there are fifty barrels of corn that I've stolen from farmers. Grind it all, and have the meal piled neatly, and use some to make my corn bread—and I might not use your bones to mend my fence!"

So saying, the Sea Hag swallowed her morning meal in one gulp and lifted off the ground and out the window without another word.

Once again, Veronica consulted her wooden companion. "Shall I begin to grind the corn?"

The doll whispered, "No. I will do the work."

Veronica stared at her helpmate. "Who are you? What are you?"

The magic doll's voice rose in the dusty air. "I am the power of strangeness. You must never be without me. But you must wait and watch for the time when *you* do the work for yourself. Now, go out and watch the sea."

So Veronica went to the edge of the sea—which she loved—and watched the waves rise and fall, as if in a hypnotic trance.

Just as the spell of the sunset on the sea was broken, the Sea Hag swooped in over her head and plowed into the sand just beside her.

"Daydreaming? Well, let's see how much of my work you've done."

Veronica ran ahead of the witch, threw open the door, and grabbed the magic doll just before the Hag came in behind her.

There, neatly in the corner, were the bags of cornmeal. And still steaming on the table was a lovely golden corn-bread cake.

The Hag swirled around the room and then leered weirdly at Veronica. "Girl, you vex me! I've given you tasks *no* human could perform, and you've done them."

Veronica smiled. "Any task is easy when your heart is light."

The Hag looked away. "I wouldn't know about that. But I have one final test that *no* one has ever passed. It is a task you must accomplish while I am here in the room with you."

Veronica suddenly clenched the wooden doll. How could she use its wondrous power with the Sea Hag watching? Then she remembered the doll's words—she must face *this* task alone. She took in a very deep breath. "What is the final task?"

The Sea Hag grinned. It was a hideous sight, black teeth, green tongue, cracked blue lips. "You must *kiss* me!"

Veronica saw the sorrow and the pain on the face of the witch, and suddenly felt such sympathy and loving kindness that she was drawn to the old woman. She threw her arms around the withered neck and kissed the Sea Hag—not once, nor even twice, but three times, and so gently that a salty tear formed in the corner of the sad old woman's eye. Suddenly the whole room was filled with a kind of golden light. The last light of the day, perhaps. For the first time in one hundred years the Sea Hag drew herself to her full height—and smiled serenely.

The old face seemed to grow younger and stronger, and the voice was full and clear. "Your magic is great."

Veronica stood in wonder at the transformation of the Hag, still clutching the wooden doll. "I have no magic –none of my own."

The Hag nodded. "Why did you come here? Tell me now."

Veronica answered right away, without a hint of fear. "My sister is filled with sorrow and I caused all the light in our house to go out. I had to come and get permission from you to have more light in our house."

The Hag's voice was very gentle. "I see. I see very well. You're a brave young girl. I'll give you the light you need."

So saying, the Hag went into the yard, beckoning Veronica to follow. The moon was rising. "I know all about your beautiful, strange doll. I tell you now that the doll had a life all its own, and can bring light back into your lives." The hag's voice rose. "Now go—and never come back!"

Not having to be told twice, Veronica left quickly. She had only gone a short way down the path when she turned to take one last look back—but all she saw was a little cottage in the woods and a fat old farmer's wife planting lilies in the moonlight.

Just as daylight was breaking, she came back to her own home.

When she opened the door, she was startled by Blackeyed Susan's greeting. Instead of her usual sighs and her ordinary tears, Susan was shivering with terror. "Oh, sister, sister—I'm so glad you're home. This house has had no light in it since you've been gone. No candle would stay lit . . . even the lamps borrowed from the neighbors sputtered out the instant I brought them into this place. We truly *have* been cursed by the Sea Hag!"

Veronica could only hold up the magic doll and say, "Well, I've been told that this will help."

Susan clutched the doll. "Is it magic? Will it make light?"

Suddenly a great flame, like lightning, blazed out from the doll's eye sockets. With a terrible cry of pain Susan was engulfed in light. Veronica could only watch in horror—until she realized what was truly happening.

All the pain, all the sorrow, all the tears—all were burned out of Susan's spirit. Veronica could see these dark emotions, shadow-demons, rising from her sister like smoke. In a final blinding flash Susan was caressed by a glowing peace so tangible and obvious that it could be seen on the girl's face for all to read.

Stunned, Susan sat down in the doorway of their house.

Before she could think what to do, Veronica heard the voice of the magic doll once more. "Now I'll scour these seven seas. I mean to bring your father home to you, be he in this world or in the next. You have my vow, he shall be home by spring!"

Veronica could hardly believe her ears. "But my father's gone, with all hands. I fear he's beyond returning."

The doll seemed to laugh. "Not to me. I can bring him back from wherever he's gone."

With that the doll flew across the waves and disappeared.

From that day on the two sisters grew to be so alike in their performance of great deeds of loving kindness that they were often mistaken for twins. And every day, after the chores were done and the candles were lit and the sun was sinking low over the ocean's horizon, they'd go out on the beach to sit and watch the sea, arm in arm, waiting for their father to come home.

# 30

# *The Tarnished Code*

My head was clearing and my ribs were really beginning to hurt. "What in the name of God would provoke you to tell me such a story?"

Suit shrugged like a man with a secret. "I've got mojo. You've got some too. I know that. What you *don't* have at the moment is a magic doll. And that's what you want. Maybe you've heard my story before."

These boys were as weird as they wanted to be, and then some. But I had to keep straight. "Yeah. I heard it before, only in the one I know, neither sister is that sad, and one of them loses her voice."

Suit almost seemed to understand what I was talking about. He squinted. "Yeah, but I'm telling you the story from *my* world. Plus, you don't know who's *got* the magic doll."

I nodded. "Okay. Now tell me the one about the guy who told you to come and find me by my car."

Tank Top was all of a sudden sad. "You should'na hurt Ronnie."

Big silence.

I tried again. "So, you're just going to let your strange little story hang in the air like this? You're not going to tell me who hired you to come get me? But, see, it's probably *that* guy that killed our pal Ronnie."

Suit shrugged. "I guess."

Tank Top sat up, inclined his head to Suit. "He don' like Ronnie that much. Thinks he's a redneck."

Suit had little patience. "He *was* a redneck. Now he's roadkill."

Tank Top was given pause. "Oh. Yeah." He seemed genuinely sorry. "Too bad. Ronnie was fun to hang with."

I chimed in. "Plus, he was great on cars. Fixed up my old heap good."

Tank Top agreed. "It was his gift. Too bad me an' him got mixed up with all this drug crap. We coulda opened up, like, a garage of somethin'."

Suit sneered. "What would *you* have done? Lift up the cars so's he could work?"

Tank Top squinted. "I was the brains of the organization."

I tried to steer the conversation back to matters more germane. "So, what now? The boss is gone. Maybe I could just be on my merry way."

Suit was not amused. "No no no. We have to keep you here. The man, he has plans for you. By and by, some cop on patrol will find Ronnie. Then we shove you at the cops so hard, you'll fall right into jail."

Tank Top was clever, all smiles. "Do not pass *Go*, do not collect—"

Suit kept it short. "Shut up." He looked at me. "My brother, in case you have not already gathered up this information on your very own, is an idiot."

I sat back. "You all don't look that much alike for brothers."

Both nodded, then, together: "Thanks."

Smiles all around.

Tank Top, all other grievances forgotten, clarified it for me. "It's good to work with the family."

I nodded.

Tank Top looked at his brother then, with more than a little urgency. "No kiddin'. I'm in a bad way."

Heavy sigh. "All right." Suit shot me a look. "You got any ideas that I can't take care of you myself if my brother goes off to wreck his health?"

I was clear. "None whatsoever."

Tank Top stood. He put out his big hand to me. We shook. He was very respectful. "Well, bud, I guess that's it. I'm goin' to a party, you goin' to jail. Life's like that sometimes."

I finally got a clear look at him. "Hey." Boy, did he look familiar.

Could it have been? "Did I see you out on the beach earlier, maybe following me and my friend up to The Hut?"

He was suddenly sharp. "Anything can happen." Stumbled to the door, turned around, waved at us both. "Never can tell." And he was gone, out the door, melted into the muggy night.

Suit watched after him. "He is an idiot. But, you know, he is also my brother."

"Right."

He eyeballed me to beat the band. "You've got no chance to mess with me. I'd kill you just like I'd gut a fish."

Hmm. Gut a fish. I don't know why, but I was thinking of Lydia all of a sudden. I looked around the room. Things were in a fair state of disarray. "Looks like you all already had a party in here."

He shrugged. "It was like this when we got here."

I craned my neck. "Blood in the bathroom."

He didn't care. "That's the room for it."

"Could be Ronnie's blood, you know."

"None of my business. Ronnie and I were not that close. He was a runner for some of our associates. Dumb as a melon. Had a habit. I've got no respect for a man with a habit."

"Unless he's your brother."

"My brother is my business."

I decided to take a different tack. "Family, huh?"

Worked. He softened. "What can you do?"

I was getting a stronger feeling of Lydia. It was very weird. Was that her blood there in the bathroom?

"I've got to go to the bathroom."

"No, you don't."

"I swear, I'd know if I had to go. I think you kicked something loose in here."

He remembered. "Oh, yeah. It was probably the kidneys."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

I lumbered up, made it to the bathroom. It was a mess. There was blood and hair on the sink and everything was in disarray. I got a good gander at the layout before I went back into the other room.

"Kind of a mess in there."

He shrugged. What did he care. Wasn't his place.

What I couldn't help noticing was a woman's umbrella on the floor by the bed.

I inclined my head toward it. "Whose umbrella?"

He looked. "I dunno."

"Belongs to a lady."

"Or a sissy boy."

"Uh-huh. Was the boss here for fun or business?"

He considered. "Far as I could tell, the guy was all business."

"So the lady, if there was one, was not entertainment."

"Not likely—but not impossible."

"You're pretty free with the opinions."

"What do I care?" Big smile.

Why was he so amiable?

"So we're pals now?"

"Well, as it happens, Mr. Tucker—for all my faults—I'm something of a fan of yours."

"How would you even know who I am?"

"You've got a reputation."

"No, I don't."

"You don't have to like it, but you have to know there's some people that know who you are."

"Hey, *I* don't even know who I am half the time."

"Whatever."

"No kidding. How do you know who I am?"

"Okay, I've been told."

"By?"

He was sly. "Got my sources."

I was suddenly feeling very paranoid. "Sources."

He decided to let me off the hook. "I told you. I know Ronnie. You cipher it out."

"Ronnie said something nice about me."

"He thought you were a great man, he said."

"So why'd I kill him, then?"

Suit was very philosophical. "I don't expect you did, after all." He lowered his voice. "Those were police handcuffs on him, looked like to me."

Ronnie worked for Lowe and Tommy. Tommy was a cop. You cipher it out. Two and two really do, sometimes, make four. What do you know?

That told me what I thought I needed to know, so I decided to play my ace. It's an old trick. I'd used it recently without meaning to. I started breathing.

You breathe in, you breathe out—by and by, you get into quite a trance.

He was nervous. "Hey. What are you doin'?"

I had my eyes open, but they were glazed.

Suit sidled over. "Cut it out, bud."

I was in another reality. I was in the center of the breath.

He shook me. "Hey. Hey. You're not dying on me, man. Damn!"

And he started shaking me all over town. Now, ordinarily a young tough such as our boy in the fine suit would be more than a match for yours truly. But as it was, he was distracted by his own mind, and I had an unfair advantage, which I used almost immediately.

I popped out my arm right into his solar plexus. The bones did the work. He didn't stand a chance. He was hit with several feet of solid bone in a delicate portion of his guts.

Surprised, he took a step back. I popped him one in the nuts. Sorry, but when you're a layabout like me, you have to take every opportunity.

He had something to say about it all in some other language. He fell on his backside.

I refrained from kicking him like he had me, but I got over to him quick so he'd know exactly how much business I meant.

Right away he understood. "Okay. Okay. I can see you might be mad, but it's just a job for me. It don't mean a thing."

Just in case, he was covering up.

I spared him. But I had questions. "Who sent you after me?"

He groaned. "You know I can't tell you that."

"And I suppose a little soccer practice on your head bone wouldn't loosen up your moral objections?"

He managed to sit halfway up. "Look . . . Flap . . . I've got absolutely nothing against you. Like I said, I'm a fan—and I think we have something special in common, if you see what I mean. Plus, you took care of Pevus Arnold, and that's okay by me, if I do say so—given the circumstances and all. But I've got a code. You can kick all the stuffing out of me that you want to, the code don't change." He leaned back against the footboard of the bed and eased his troubled guts. "But let me also say, and just see if this sounds familiar: 'If you started something, you'd have to kill me. I wouldn't quit coming till you did. You can take that to the bank,' or words to that effect."

Words to that effect, nothing. It was an exact quote. It only took me a second to make the connection. It was a final confirmation.

I looked down at him. "So. What, exactly, do you and I do now?"

He relaxed. I wasn't going to kick him. He could see that. "You go your way and I go mine? No point, no foul. You and me could skuffle

about like this back an' forth all night long if we wanted, but I've got to go and worry about my bro—and I expect you've got troubles enough of your own too. I don't want to pop you, you don't want to pop me. Let's let it go at that."

"*Que sera, sera.*"

He tried getting to his feet. "I *love* Doris Day."

I took his elbow and helped him up.

He straightened himself out. "What was that thing you were doing. I thought you'd had a heart attack. You looked, like, *dead*."

"It's all breath. Breath and concentration."

"Ohhh." But he didn't see.

"So can I really rely on your not following me anymore?"

He considered. "Look. My job was: I find you and bring you here. Can we agree I've done that?"

"Done and done."

"So . . ."

". . . according to the code . . ."

". . . my work here is finished."

I had to smile. "Guy's *got* to have a code."

He agreed. "Without it we are little more than rude animals."

"Amen."

He looked at me. "Just a word of advice: our so-called host with the handcuffs? He's nuts and tough all at the same time. He's got some kinda bad Jones. Not a drug, I don't guess. But it's something heavy that motivates the man—so, you know, watch your butt."

"Words to live by."

He blinked, fussed with his tie, nodded a farewell. "I make it a part of *my* code."

And he was gone.

# 31

## *Little Shadows*

I beat it back to the car, taking notes about the location of the bed-and-breakfast as I went. Poor old Ronnie was lying undisturbed right where we had left him. I hustled myself on down to River Street.

Dally was in the dark in the front of the joint; zipped the door open when she saw me coming.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Took a little longer to take care of Ronnie. I met up with some of his pals."

She got closer. "What?"

"Not now. I got a really bad feeling about something. But I gotta ask the boys here a few key questions so I'll know which way is up."

She kept the lights in front off, and got a nice booth in the back. Called out to the Turners. "Boys? Y'all come on in here, okay?"

They wandered in like they'd just gotten out of high school gym.

Maytag smiled. "Hey, Mr. Tucker. Where you been?"

"Out. Mind if we chat?"

He was agreeable. "What's on your mind?"

Peachy sat too.

I stood. "Whatever else is on my mind, I got a few pressing questions."

Maytag nodded. "Such as?"

"You all got away from the cops fairly well back on the island. I didn't even know they were outside."

Maytag grinned. "Shoot. We heard 'em comin' halfway up the path."

Peachy added. "What in the world you think we were doin' goin' to bed so early?"

Dally had to rib me. "You're some detective. They heard the cops comin', and you called me for a chat."

Maytag tried to help me out. "It's our years of huntin'. We hear the sounds of the forest. We knew it was men comin' up. Then we escaped silently and"—he looked around mysteriously—"we blended with the shadows."

Peachy nodded.

Maytag went on. "Besides, we did what we wanted: got you to help us find Lydia."

Peachy spoke up to me. "You think she'll come back there?"

I nodded. "To the graveyard? Yes, I do."

He wanted to know. "How come?"

Dally interrupted. "He's got a system. Don't ask about it, but it works. It's kinda like a hunch."

"Ohhh." The twins nodded slowly, in unison.

I wasn't finished. "So you just left me there."

Peachy smiled. "Shoot. We let you get rescued from us evil kidnappers."

Maytag shoved in. "Saved by the hometown brigade."

Peachy tapped his brother. "That's right. What's that boy they say plays a fiddle?"

I had the answer. "Taylor. Plays the viola."

Again with the unison "Ohhh."

Peachy began to philosophize. "He's a good boy, seems like to me. He don't wanna be no policeman. He wants to be a musician." He took a breath. "Did you ever think how much damage is done in this world by people that hates their jobs?"

Maytag offered. "Like those postal workers you always hear about."

It made me nervous to think that in my reflective moments I examined the same mysteries of the universe that plagued the Turner twins.

Dally saved me from my reverie. "You boys knocked us out good. Your daddy's sleeping pills are still working on me."

Peachy was concerned. "You still sleepy, Ms. Oglethorpe?"

"Not sleepy. They got me kinda . . . jumpy."

Maytag nodded. "It's the aftereffects."

Dally went on. "Yeah, but what I mean is, how come you didn't just motor on up to our table at The Hut, have a seat, and ask Flap to help you find Lydia?"

"You was bein' followed."

She looked at me.

I confirmed. "Savannah cops had a tail on us. Our friend Ronnie Tibadeau was involved. I thought I saw somebody weird on the beach, but I was preoccupied." She took a breath, but I wouldn't let her get to her point. "And Detective Acree already made fun of me for missing the tail, so you can skip the wisecracks."

She went back to Maytag. "So you saw a guy tailin' us?"

"Uh-huh. We knew you was bein' watched, so we had to get away where we could talk a little while. I was personally hopin' it would be longer, but, like we say, the police come in on us."

Dally squinted. "So how come the cops didn't see you two cartin' me an' Flap out of The Hut?"

Maytag shrugged, very calm. "Like I said, we blend with the shadows."

Very mysterious, if it's possible to be mysterious and goofy at the same time.

Dally pressed. "You had more you wanted to tell Flap?"

"Maybe."

"You want to talk now?"

I settled back in my seat. "You want to tell me exactly what happened the day of the murder?"

He nodded. Peachy looked around, once again checking to see that nobody was lurking outside.

Dally sat back. "Okay. Let's hear it."

Maytag began his story.

# 32

## *Murder*

The day of the murder was hot and bright. About ten in the morning the twins showed up at the bank, summoned by Lowe Acree. It was full of people. Maytag, because he was the older of the boys, had determined he would do all the talking.

They sidled up to the desk out front of Lowe's office. Connie greeted them.

"Hey, boys. Mr. Acree is expecting you." She lowered her voice. "He's in a worse mood than usual. You all be careful what you say."

Peachy couldn't resist a few words. "Maytag's gonna do all the talkin'."

She smiled.

They went into Lowe's office. Lowe was indeed in a rare mood.

"Well. The Ton of Twins." He was simultaneously making fun of the way they pronounced their last name and their size. He thought he was very clever.

The boys smiled. Peachy waved.

Maytag talked. "We got your message."

Lowe cracked his knuckles. "So. You know it won't do any good to mess with me. I mean business. You sell me that land, I don't cause you any trouble. I pay a fair price. Otherwise your daddy's loans and mortgages and anything else I can scare up, they all be in a wad of

trouble so thick he won't be able to buy a peanut to boil. I can mess you all up so bad you won't ever get out from under. Your great-great-grandbabies—if you all are capable of reproducing—will *still* be in complete financial ruin far past the next century."

Maytag sat down in one of the chairs in front of Lowe's desk and motioned Peachy to sit in the other. They sat in silence.

The silence made Lowe madder. "So what's it going to be, boys? You jack-leg retards wanna ruin your family for the next two hundred years?"

Maytag appeared to think about it. "No. No, sir, I don't believe we'd like to do that."

"That's right. So you sell me that land, and everything is fine. You get a little extra play money, and I get a piece of land you don't use anyway. Everybody's happy."

Maytag tried to choose his words carefully. "That land—is made to grow pines and things, and keep deer on. And to produce blackberries. And to maybe clear one day and sell the timber and build a house for the grandbabies you expressed a concern for, which was nice of you. That land is not for a Dempster Dumpster. It ain't no garbage can. I can't live with the idea that you'd put poison down in it, just because you got nowhere else to get rid of it. Can you see the difference? One way the land is alive, and the other way the land is dead. And I can't be responsible for killin' it." That was the end of his speech.

Lowe lurched forward. "You feeble dickweed retard. You got absolutely no idea what I want to use that land for."

Maytag was calm. "Chemical dump."

"Shut up. You're too stupid to understand my business. All I have to do is put some kind of a lien on the property against whatever your daddy owes, or what I can make up, and I could get the land anyway. I'm trying to do you a favor."

"We appreciate that."

Lowe just got madder. He stood up. "I'm going to have that piece of crap acreage whether you sell it to me or not."

"Now, see . . . that's just the problem, Mr. Acree. You think of it as a piece of crap, and we think of it—"

"Shut up! You're too stupid to think of it as anything! I'll mess you all up so bad, you won't be able to sleep at night."

"I never yet had any trouble sleepin'—"

"I said to shut up! You got no idea what trouble is. I got money. I got reputation. I got the law in my pocket. You got dick!"

Without any kind of warning Lydia Habersham Acree slipped into

the room. She'd apparently been in Lowe's private bathroom. She'd been crying, and one side of her face looked bright red, like it was sunburned or sore.

"Lowe, sit down."

He whipped around to face her. "I'm not finished with you either. You just go back in there and wait till I'm done with my business."

"No, Lowe. I'm not staying."

He got from around his desk and started for her. "Oh, yes you are."

Maytag was up in a flash, bumped him like a football player blocking. Lowe took a tumble against his back wall. Peachy was up on the other side of him, and the twins gently locked his arms at his side. Just as Lowe started to holler, Maytag got him in a kind of choke hold, and Lowe couldn't even breathe. Yelling was out of the question.

They wrestled him back to his seat.

Peachy whispered into Maytag's ear. "I know I ain't supposed to talk here, but if you don't let go of this man's throat, he'll pass out."

Maytag whispered back. "That's what I want him to do. Then he'll be quiet. Besides, it ain't his throat, it's his jugulars that counts."

Peachy made a face. "Don't do it too long."

He didn't. Lydia was helping them get Lowe to his chair. She leaned over to Lowe and whispered in his ear.

All they could hear was the first part: "You've struck me for the third and final time."

And then Lowe fell forward onto the desk, and his forehead hit with a very loud whack.

Lydia was crying, and the boys saw blood trickling out from underneath Lowe's head. Maytag pointed Lydia back into the bathroom. She went. Peachy leaned over to check Lowe's breathing. It was shallow, but there.

He hollered out, "Connie, come in here quick. Somethin's the matter with Lowe."

She came in, panicked, called the ambulance, the police, and the fire department. Everybody in the bank was at the door. Maytag checked the bathroom, but Lydia had somehow vanished.

With a glance the twins saw a chance to leave quietly, too, while all the attention was on Lowe. They left, went by Lydia's house. Her car was gone. They went home, told their father what had happened. He tried to get them to stay and find out what had happened to Lowe, but they were worried about Lydia, and took off.

They found out on the radio news, later that evening on their drive

south, that Lowe was dead; they were wanted. They'd been looking for Lydia ever since. When they couldn't find her, they'd called their father, and he'd told them about me.

That's when they came to me for help.

# 33

# *Lydia in Autumn*

That was the story.

Dally was straight. "So maybe you did kill him."

Maytag laughed out loud. "Shoot. I squeezed Ida harder than that, and she's a old woman."

Peachy wasn't laughing. "Lydia whispered a thing into him, like in the story. That's what made him die."

Maytag hushed his brother.

We sat for a minute, but it got to Dally. "Story? Sounds like the one Sally told me."

Peachy looked at Maytag. Maytag nodded. Peachy looked back at Dally. "See, we given her a book for Christmas. It was just after that Thanksgivin' pageant."

Maytag couldn't help himself. He had to tell me. "We taken first prize in the giant pumpkin."

Peachy was sidetracked. "Big as a Ford truck engine."

Maytag nodded. "Maybe bigger."

Peachy was lost in reminiscence. "And we took to Lydia right away. She stood in front of that pumpkin just a-starin' at it and sayin' how that big round face reminded her of a harvest moon."

Maytag smiled, remembering too. "We carved a human face out of it the second day after we won the prize."

Peachy went on. "Anyways, we got to talkin' in the cool autumn air—I love the fall. She was so sweet, and that pretty hair—I tell you what's the truth, I had me a crush on 'er right then and there."

Maytag patted his brother's arm. "It happened thataway with Momma and Daddy: met at a fair, liked each other right away."

Peachy shook his head. "We got to know her. Lots of people was scared of her, how strange she was. But we . . ."

Maytag helped. "We never had no little sister. That's what it was."

Peachy grinned right at me. "Crush wore off. She's just too crazy for a girlfriend."

Maytag agreed. "But, with everything about our family, you know, we thought she'd fit right in as a member. We got us a whole buncha crazy kin. And when you meet her, you can tell . . . there's somethin' not right about her."

Peachy muscled in. "Anyway, she was always talkin' about how much she loved bein' out on the sea. She said it was clean and the waves made her forget. Didn't never say what there was to forget. So, but—we got her a book of stories about it."

Maytag detailed. *"Folktales of the Southern Sea Islands."*

Peachy was proud. "She loved it. Read it over and over."

Maytag nodded. "Seemed to have a right strong effect on her."

Peachy turned to me again. "Because, like we said, she ain't . . ." But he couldn't find the words exactly.

I explained it to Dally. "The boys think Lydia's not human."

Dally was very dry. "Maybe she's not."

I had to toss her a look. "What would you know about it, missy?"

"Missy?"

"You heard me."

She looked away. "Save it."

That was it. She knew something about Lydia that she wasn't telling me, but I wouldn't get another peep out of her on the subject. I knew better. So I went back to the twins. "How'd you get off the island? There were guards at the boats. I saw them when Taylor, the viola-boy, took me home."

"We had a boat on the other end under some bushes."

Peachy finished. "Just in case."

I summed up. "You guys heard the cops coming from half a mile off, sneaked out unseen in the last of daylight, made it to the other end of the island where you had stashed an extra boat for just such an emergency, got back to Savannah, figured I'd go to the Old Old Baptist, and found me there."

They nodded their famous unison nod.

Dally shoved a look my way. "Why would they figure that?"

I raised my eyebrows. "They know I like a good story."

Maytag nodded. "Yep."

I looked at Dally. "That's where the angel is—the angel that took Ida's voice away. They had to know that's where I'd go. That statue marks a pivotal point in their lives even long before they were born. That's the place that altered their mother and their aunt. Visiting it's like a pilgrimage. They had to go there. They had to know I'd be curious enough to go there myself. It's too big a deal."

Dally nodded, but I wasn't certain she understood.

I looked back at the boys. "You're not stupid. But you could be guilty. It's good guilty murder-planning stealth you all exhibited."

Peachy shrugged. "Or we could just know how the police are."

Maytag continued. "Especially Tommy Acree."

Peachy: "He don't like us."

Maytag: "For some reason."

They sat like bumps on a log, and I use the phrase advisedly. I began to think; always a danger sign. Either they were the simplest boys in town, or they were nothing like what they seemed, and very devious—and very dangerous. One way they were clever, cold killers. The other way they were the lilies of the field. It was a wide berth, and I'd been fooled before by people who seemed sweet and simpleminded and had turned out to be very, very wrong. It's a great cover for a murderer.

Dally caught me. "Hey, Flap. You're thinkin'."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry."

"Try not to let it happen again."

The boys giggled like little kids.

Dally gave them the eye stronger than usual. "You boys don't look that much alike—for twins."

They both sobered up quick. Maytag looked at Peachy. "Should we tell 'em?"

Long pause.

Peachy squinted. "I dunno. Maybe not."

Maytag nodded. "Still—it's a good story. Might be useful some kinda way for Mr. Tucker."

Peachy considered. "And Ms. Oglethorpe like her a story."

Maytag nodded. "It's a good story." He looked at me. "Wanna hear how come we don't look much like twins?"

I smiled. "I think it's got something to do with Aunt Ida."

Dally wanted to get it. "How in the world would you know a thing like that?"

I kept staring at Maytag. "Because it's one of my theories about something Aunt Ida was trying to tell me when I left her porch, right?"

He smiled right back. "You surely are a smart man." He looked at his brother. "Peach? You wanna tell it?"

Peachy took up the mantle.

# 34

## *Sisters and Mothers*

As was widely known, Ida and Mavis Habersham of Savannah, Georgia, were as close as sisters can get. What one had, the other wanted. What one wanted, the other tried to get. They were like one person. They did all their work together, wore the same clothes, and shared secrets far into the night.

As they grew, they were quite popular, and boys dated both girls all through high school. One autumn they went with a big church group to the county fair inland.

At the fair J. D. Tucker saw Mavis—just once, walking down the path to the livestock area—and he decided then and there that she was the one for him. He was instantly struck with permanent love. Sometimes it happens. He vowed to his friends that the only work he would do from that moment on would be to court that girl until she married him. The farm could go to weed, the plow could rust, the tractor could just fall apart. It didn't matter. All that mattered was marrying Mavis.

They were wed the next spring. Ida was the maid of honor, and was just as happy as Mavis.

The next autumn, a year to the day since J.D. had first seen Mavis, they discovered she was pregnant. Ida was just as happy as Mavis.

As Mavis got closer to the time of delivering her firstborn, Ida came to stay with her and J.D. to help out around the house and to

share the experience with her sister. They were like one person again. They did all their work together, wore the same clothes, and shared secrets far into the night.

J.D. was worried about his wife, and worked all the time, partly so they'd have enough money for the baby, and partly to keep himself occupied so he wouldn't sit around thinking about what might go wrong. He worked all day on the farm, all evening at a Feed and Seed, and all night as a watchman for a bank over in Tifton. He only slept five hours out of twenty-four, and even then it was a restless sleep.

One night in May there came up a thunderstorm that people still talk about to this day: hail the size of house bricks, constant lightning searing the sky as bright as noon, roaring thunder that made it impossible to hear anything else.

J.D. was at the bank when the storm began, and all the power in town went out. He tried to make some phone calls, but the phone lines were out too. He was impossibly torn between the awful worry about his wife and the imperative of staying at his job in such an emergency. He stayed at the bank, because he thought it was the right thing to do, but the bank owners didn't know that. They always thought, from that night on, that J.D. had deserted his post and gone home to his wife and sister-in-law, leaving their money unprotected. Some time after his long hours were done, and he'd headed home to his wife, the power came back on and the alarms sounded. When everybody got to the bank, of course J.D. had gone. It was nearly two hours past his quitting time. He never bothered to protest against the accusations, even when the bankers fired him. J.D. knew what he'd done, and he knew he'd done right. That was the start of a feud between the two families that has lasted into the present day.

On the night of the storm in Beautiful the sisters were scared to death. Lightning was popping the ground all around their little house, and thunder continuously rattled the windows and shook the walls. Hail broke through weak places in the roof and pounded craters in the truck outside. The kitchen garden was destroyed in the first half hour. Lightning struck the feed corn in the second hour and set it on fire, but the rain and hail were so furious that they put out the fire before it could completely burn down the crib.

Mavis was so terrified, huddled in the middle of the kitchen, that she was thrown into labor.

But so was Ida. That's the secret of the story. Ida was just as pregnant as Mavis. What one sister had, the other one always wanted.

This was the secret of all secrets the sisters had shared. When

Mavis had told her sister all about the glories of married life, Ida had been jealous and wanted the same love that Mavis had. She'd found it in the arms of someone remarkable, but she never revealed the identity of her paramour. She'd become increased with child as she'd lived with her sister, but they'd kept to themselves. No one but J.D. saw them, and even though he'd had suspicions, he'd never voiced them.

Now, on this terrible night, because of the trauma of the storm, the two women delivered their babies together. Mavis had trouble. Ida didn't, even though her baby was premature.

J.D. arrived at his home in the first light of the next morning. When he saw the smoldering corn crib and the battered roof and the ruined garden, he just stood outside the house, afraid to go in.

He was only roused to cross the threshold by the sound of babies crying. He rushed into the bedroom, and there were Mavis and Ida in bed, each holding a tiny newborn.

When he came into the room, Ida woke up. Mavis didn't. She had passed away in the night while the other three had slept; while J.D. had protected the Tifton Home Loan.

He sat down on the bed and took up the child out of Mavis's arms, and cried like the day Jesus was buried.

Later he gathered up what he supposed to be his twin boys. Even though he had suspicions, he didn't make them known. He left Ida sleeping and called the Peaker Family Mortuary, Caring Since 1934. Old Mr. Peaker made all the arrangements to bury Mavis Habersham Turner in her family plot at the Old Old Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia.

When they were in high school, the boys had come home wondering why they didn't look anything alike. They'd just had a biology lesson. At the dinner table Ida calmly tapped out the story she'd never before told to a soul and had kept all these years in her heart. Mr. Turner just stared at the food he was eating, like he always did at the dinner table. When the boys wanted to know which son belonged to Mavis and which to Ida, she said she didn't know. When they wanted to know who was the father of the other boy, she said she'd never tell—except to say it was nobody they knew. They could see she was telling the truth, and never asked about it again.

When they looked to their father for some kind of answer, he told them his opinion. "Sometimes your family ain't what you was born with. Sometimes your family is who you say it is. I say you're both my boys. That's all."

That was good enough for everybody, and they'd never worried a minute about it since. They agreed that J.D. was their father; Ida was their aunt. It was settled because they'd decided it was settled. It didn't take anything more than that.

# 35

## *Dream Reunion*

Peachy grinned, happy to have told his tale to another living soul, happy to see the effect it had on his audience.

But I was confused. "So . . . Lydia really could be some kind of relative."

Dally shot in. "No, she couldn't—not to *them*, I don't think."

"But she's a Habersham, the mother and the aunt were Habershams. . . ."

"Flap, take my word for it. Lydia's not a Habersham."

Maytag nodded. "Took us a while to figure that one out, too, Mr. Tucker."

I looked at him. "And you really don't know which is which, who's the other father, none of it?"

They shook their heads, but they were smiling. They really didn't care. It really was settled in their minds.

Dally wouldn't let me go. "See, Flap: The event happens, devoid of any valuation. *You* impart the meaning to it."

"Shut up."

The boys looked at her. She responded. "That's a little bit of Tucker horse manure that he's always slingin' around. He can dish it out, but he's not much in the 'takin' it' department, is he?"

Peachy grinned at me. "She got you there, Mr. Tucker."

I kept my dignity. "Shut up, the both of you. I'm still trying to get why Lydia's *not* related to you. Not to mention: How come you never told me your own mother was buried in the same graveyard where all that other business happened?"

They looked at each other. Peachy answered. "Just . . . didn't seem to fit the line of conversation at the time."

Maytag agreed. "Besides, you know about it *now*."

"I don't know anything now. I don't know who you two are. I don't know half of what Dally's talking about. I don't know who Lydia is or why we have to find her. And I don't know who killed Lowe Acree or why."

Dally patted my arm. "Finished?"

I shook my head. "I'm just getting started. And by the way"—I shot my gaze right back to the boys—"your father knew your mother less than two years and hasn't forgotten her in the last twenty-seven?"

Peachy was more serious than I'd seen him. "He loved her, Mr. Tucker. Permanently."

I wasn't sure. "Yeah, but . . ."

Dally helped. "Maybe if she'd lived, she'd be complaining about his snoring by now; he'd be grouchy about her reading in bed or somethin'—but as it is, she died while he was still in love. Nothin' can help that."

I gave up. "Okay. But the rest of it. It's making me nuts."

Dally put a cooling hand on my shoulder. "You know what you need? You need to do your little trick. You need to get right in your mind and find Lydia and solve the murder of Lowe Acree and go back home to your nice loud apartment in the city and come over to Easy and character up the place." She patted me. "That's what you need."

The boys were nodding at me. I didn't know if they understood anything about what she was saying, but they were very supportive. There was little choice involved. Dally said it was time: It was time.

"Got another room or something where I can go and have a moment to myself?"

She smiled. "How about what used to be the assistant manager's office?"

"Funny."

"Remember where it is?"

"Not even remotely."

She pointed. "Around the corner, first office on the left. We'll wait here."

I nodded. The boys smiled. Dally waved. I was up and around the

corner in what seemed to me an awkward silence. Once I was in the office, I could hear that they had resumed conversation, but I couldn't hear the words at all. It was just a kind of pleasant murmur.

I sat in the only chair in the room. I tried to get everything out of my head. All the weird family histories and connections and gothic idiocies. I tried to see the golden curtain wafting in front of me. Since I didn't have the luxury of looking out at the sea, I tried to breathe like the sound of the waves. I know it sounds wacky, but it helps.

I don't know how much time went by just breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, seeing nothing. But finally it came back: the waking dream, the family reunion; everybody sitting around tables eating fried chicken. The Turners and the Acrees and Horace from Atlanta and Pevus Arnold and his wife, and all the strange inhabitants of my recent days—they were all eating fried chicken and drinking from mason jars that said Rusty's Barbecue on the label on the side.

And there, across the yard, was Lydia waving, her face turned away from my view. "Hello, Flap. Good to see you again." She was standing by the stone angel, laughing. The graveyard by the church was dark and filled with open graves and magnolia trees. Lowe Acree was popping up out of one of the graves. Lydia was laughing at him uncontrollably. I came over to stop her, since no one else seemed able to do it. When I got there, still with her face turned away, she said, "Hello, Flap. Good to see you again." It was like a broken record. It echoed in a kind of musical way.

I walked closer to her. I had a very strong feeling of finally scratching an itch I'd had forever. It was very satisfying. In that moment of relief I found myself right next to Lydia. In the darkness her voice sounded so familiar. She said, still keeping her face turned away from me, "You have to come tonight. It's the last night I'll be here."

I reached my hand up to brush the hair away from her face, and turned it toward me so I could finally see her clearly. It was like trying to move my hand underwater, in slow motion.

When I finally touched her, and saw who she was, the shock of seeing that face snapped me out of my reverie like a rifle shot through the forehead.

# 36

## *Stone Angel*

I shoved myself up; scrambled around the desk and out the door. "Dally!"

"Flap? You okay?"

I rounded the corner, moving fast. She could see I wasn't okay. "We gotta get back to the churchyard now."

"What's the matter?"

I was madder at her than I think I'd ever been. "You know what's the matter."

My being mad like that, it made the boys nervous, which just poured gasoline on the fire of my suspicions about them. They had no idea what was up with me, but they could see it wasn't good. Nobody made a peep. They could see it would set me off. They could see nobody would want to set me off in the shape I was in. It could have international repercussions. We just gathered ourselves up and zipped like hornets out the door.

We must have been a sight, the four of us, God knows what hour of the night, traipsing up from the river and on toward the cemetery. We were four silhouettes from two different worlds: two urban swells, two simple farm boys. Or two suckers and two killers, that was a possibility too.

And what do you know: It actually is darkest just before the dawn.

The night was late, moon was set, and outside the protection of the streetlights it was black as the belly of the beast.

We slouched into the boneyard like grave robbers, looking every direction at once. I was in the lead, strong and holy from the vision I'd had. Okay, maybe the magic didn't always work like this, but it was powerful and terrifying when it did.

I headed straight for the stone angel where Ida had left her voice so many years before. Somewhere close, the remains of somebody's mother lay resting. And not far away was the last earthly evidence of strangers who gave their lives in the Revolutionary War so that we would all have the inalienable right to mispronounce English in America.

There was somebody already standing by the angel. She was in a white, airy summer dress, and in the thick, humid night anybody would have put her down as a ghost. The others hung back, unsure of what was going down. They stayed in the shadows. I, only, am escaped, alone, to tell thee. I approached the apparition.

She was staring at the angel so intently, I thought it might bust. It seemed more glowing than before. I walked heavily to announce my presence, but she was undistracted. I sidled up next to her. She knew I was there. We just stood, the both of us, looking at the angel.

Finally she looked my way, calmly. "Hello, Flap. Good to see you again."

"Hello, Lydia." Only the name wasn't Lydia when I knew her before. She used to be called Sylvia. Cousin Sylvia.

# 37

## *Cousins, No Kissing*

I might not have recognized her if I hadn't met her first in the dream thing. It had been quite a long time since I'd last seen her. But all kinds of things were coming back to me. I was remembering how my cousin Sylvia was something of a *very* free spirit, even in the young days. She used to tell everybody she was from another planet. Lots of people believed her.

When she was in the third grade, she made up her own language—a complete language with its own rules of diction, grammar—everything. The last time I'd seen her was when the family visited her in the state mental hospital in Milledgeville. She wasn't nuts, she was just very smart and significantly strange. It's a combination you really don't want to be in the South. It's not tolerated. Dumb-and-strange is fine. Smart-and-conservative is admired. Smart-and-strange gets you locked up in the loony bin. Just like my poor old grandma.

I'd have to admit that I'd always been a little nervous about the same thing happening to me sometime. In plenty of nightmares I'd seen Cousin Sylvia, wide-eyed and unbelieving, standing in the hall at the hospital, clutching a little rag doll that she used to talk to in her special language, surrounded by older people who were babbling in tongues—tongues that had no diction nor grammar. She was waving good-bye to me, and I was very ashamed that I didn't wave back. I was

afraid, somehow, that if I waved, they'd all know I was *like* her—and they'd keep *me* there too. I hadn't really thought all that much about my childhood in a very long time. Just as well.

I did my best to match her casual delivery. "So, where've you been keeping yourself?"

She smiled. "Here and there."

"I'll bet. Do you have any idea where you are now?" Just checking.

"I'm saying good-bye to the angel. I had to. The Turners brought me here a few times to talk to the angel, so I had to tell her good-bye."

"Ah. And?"

"I did. My work is done here. I'm going back to the sea."

"Yeah, Sylvia . . . or Lydia. Um, that's what I'd like to talk to you about."

She sighed. "It really is good to see you. You never can tell, you know."

"I know." But I had no idea what she was talking about. I was doing what they call *humoring* her. "So. What've you been doing lately?"

"Oh, this and that, Flap. This and that."

I could see that she had only gotten stranger as the years had passed—and that was saying something. I was contemplating the problem when Dally came up behind me.

"So it really is her."

I shot her a look that could have knocked over a steamship. "I presume *this* is your little secret?"

"I wasn't *sure* it was your cousin. I only met her once or twice—and I was about six, so I didn't want to say when I wasn't completely sure."

"But you suspected."

"Oh, yeah."

"From the beginning."

"Uh-huh."

"How? What made you suspect?"

She looked down. "I just had a feeling. Sally too. I remembered things . . ."

"And you didn't share. Imagine how that makes me feel."

"Let's not get into this now, Flap."

"Oh, let's. I'm just about as mad at you as I'm ever going to get."

"About *this*?"

I burned her with a look. "Why couldn't you just tell me I might be looking for my own crazy cousin?"

She avoided eye contact. "I know how you feel about your family."

Dalliance Oglethorpe was talking about my aforementioned fear of being crazy myself. When you have a couple of really nutty relatives, you start to worry about your own stability. When you're partly raised by a woman who gets signals from the radio, you have to wonder if any rubbed off. You have a cousin who was shuttled off to a mental hospital when she's seven, you have to think twice about anything out of the ordinary about yourself. And I think just about everybody would agree I was plenty out of the ordinary.

So all I could do was nod.

Dally didn't get me in the eye. "Look, I don't want to go over, right now, how much I saw this thing with Lenny get to you. I watched you night after night over in the club, sloshin' down that snooty French grape and figurin' again how you could have done it better, how you messed up, how it all went wrong."

"I don't like to be wrong."

"Yeah, that's my point."

"I don't like loose ends."

"Yeah, I know. You're the neatest straight guy I know."

I was still impatient with her. "So?"

"So I know how reminding you of some of your kin just puts the depression thing into a tailspin sometimes."

"So that's why you didn't let me in on this little secret?"

"I just didn't see the point in even bringing it up if there wasn't anything to it. I didn't think you'd be clear."

"Clear, Dally? Clear?"

"I didn't know if you'd be thinkin' right."

Lydia interrupted. She was Lydia now –not Sylvia anymore. I could see that. Okay by me. You can be anybody you want to be, in my book.

She smiled at me. "She's right, Flap. If anybody ought to know how badly a person's affected by not thinking right, I think you ought to agree it'd be me . . . pretty much?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "Yeah. I guess I'd have to say you know more than your share about that."

The boys couldn't stay away. Maytag slipped up and put his hand on Lydia's shoulder. He was very soft and very sweet. "Hey, darlin'. Glad you remembered to come back here like we told you to—if you was ever lost in Savannah."

You could actually see her face brighten when he touched her, the way some kids respond when they get a clinch from mom. "Hey, Maytag." She peered into the darkness. "Peachy? You out there?"

He appeared. "Sugar-bee. We come to get you home."

She smiled at that too. Okay, so they *were* family, of a sort. You could tell.

Dally let them be. "See?"

I wouldn't have it. "I'm not talking to you, maybe ever again. And this isn't coincidence." I looked all around me in the black night air, and hot as it was, I had a chill. My paranoid genes were acting up—but that's what you get when you're nuts.

Maytag interrupted what could have been a mighty incident between me and my former best friend. "Hey. Mr. Tucker? Thanks for helpin' us find Lydia."

I looked at him. He had the face of an angel himself. Looking at him at that moment, I couldn't believe *anybody* could ever have thought him capable of murder.

And speaking of which, I had to ask, partly to calm myself down: "So, Lydia, who killed Lowe Acree . . . in *your* opinion? I'm collecting answers."

She looked back at the angel. "Oh, I did. He really deserved it."

I blinked. "He deserved it?"

"Oh, my, yes." She closed her eyes.

I looked at Dally, still a little out of sorts with her. "Well, I'm going to have to sit down to hear this one."

So we marched our little party back to the benches where Dally and I had contemplated French Symbolists and thieves. We all sat down. It was a late-night historical discussion group, or a ghost hunters' club in a boneyard.

I began. "Okay, then, Lydia: Spill. What's the story?"

She didn't know quite how to start. "Well . . ."

Maytag finally got it. "Wait a minute." He looked at me. "I just figured out: You know Lydia some kinda way."

I looked at the ground. "She's my cousin. My grandmother's brother was her grandfather."

That just confused him. "Grandmother's . . . grandfather . . ."

I shifted. "I knew her when we were kids. Haven't seen her in a really long while. Last I saw of her, they'd carted her away to Milledgeville."

Milledgeville State Mental Hospital—in the old days you'd make fun of other kids by saying, "Are you from Milledgeville or something?" Like everybody in the town was off. Wouldn't have wanted to be on their city council back then.

She nodded. "Yeah. I was in and out of that place for years."

I took a little breath. "Really?"

"Well, when I was in there first time, you know, Momma and Daddy died."

I nodded. "Now that you mention it, I think there was talk around our house about it." It was coming back to me. They'd killed themselves in a suicide pact. They'd thought the end of the world was just around the corner. That's why they'd taken Sylvia/Lydia, their only daughter, to the mental hospital. She'd refused to join them. Even at her young age she'd tried to reason with them. Their response had been to lock her up. This may explain to all and sundry the further complications of the concept "It runs in the family." I could only imagine what it would do to me if I'd been locked up when I was that young—and then my folks had iced themselves on top of it. I looked over at Dalliance, and all of a sudden I wasn't completely mad anymore. I was just thankful I'd had a pal like her since I was a kid. Plenty better than having to face it all alone, like Lydia'd had to.

Lydia went on. "I was adopted by the Habershams. They couldn't have children. When I got out of Milledgeville, I went to an orphanage in Hapeville. They got me there. They had all my names legally changed. It was their idea of giving me a fresh start."

Dally was curious about that one. "Fresh start?"

"The Habershams knew my family history, but they didn't really think I was insane. The only real reason *they* ever used to send me off to the hospital every once in a while, when I got older, was that I was what they called a wild child. If I did something they thought was strange, they'd pack me off again. Most of the time it was something really small. Like once I wanted to get a tattoo of a mermaid on my forearm. It was my Popeye phase. That made them really nervous."

I nodded. "I met them. I can imagine."

Dally jumped in. "Yeah. Okay. Whatever. I guess what I'm really more interested in is why you'd marry Lowe Acree in the first place. He was just, like, the town bully or something—him and his cousin, Tommy. What was the attraction?"

"He said he loved me."

Dally gave her a look. "Uh-huh."

She smiled. "My head'd been messed with so much at that point, I would have believed it if he'd told me I was Santa Claus. I just would have started handing out presents."

My turn. "Uh-huh. There's got to be more. Maybe there's a story that goes with it. Ms. Oglethorpe loves a good story."

# 30

# *A Marriage Proposal*

Lydia obliged. She told us how she'd been minding her own business, as much as she could, when something wicked came her way—in the form of a rich, handsome businessman.

"Miss? Excuse me, ma'am?"

She dropped her rigging, slung herself over the hold, and looked at the guy on the dock. "Uh-huh."

"Are you Lydia Habersham?"

"Yup."

"June over at the DeSoto told me about you. I'd like very much to catch me a big old fish. She says you're the best."

"She's a friend."

"My name is Lowe? Lowe Acree? I got a bank over in Tifton, and I got a few weeks off, here. I was hoping to start now and go all weekend, at least."

"It's seven hundred and fifty dollars a day."

"Whoa. Everybody else is five hundred, tops."

"Then go with everybody else."

"How come you're so much more?"

"Keeps out the pikers."

Lowe Acree smiled. "Uh-huh. Well, then. I'm no piker. When do we leave."

"Shove your stuff up on deck. I'll cast off."

Her hair was nearly white from being in the sun all the time, but her skin was still pale. She took Lowe's elbow as he came on board. "I got some number-two-hundred sunblock, or some such. I think it even keeps out X rays. I use it and I never even tan. I suggest you put some on. The sun's brutal out there."

He waved her off. "Aw, I could use a little sun on me."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

They were underway in five minutes. Lydia was very good. That day Lowe caught a marlin, a shark, and about half a dozen smaller fish. He decided to keep them all.

When the sun was setting, and Lowe was putting some Intensive Care lotion on his sunburn, they headed west, toward the coast.

"Well, Lydia—this has indeed been a day worth the money."

"Yup."

"Could I interest you in a little beverage over at June's at the DeSoto? Maybe a bite of dinner? My treat."

"I don't think so."

"Come on. No harm. I do believe you are the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my life. What color hair is that?"

"Usually what they call auburn, but the sun's bleached it out. I don't know what they'd call it now."

"They'd call it remarkable."

"Uh-huh."

"You're not buying any of this, I see."

"Nope."

"You don't intend to go out with me."

She throttled the engine. They were coming into dock. "Nope."

"No matter what."

"That's right."

"Not even for somebody rich enough to set you free."

She laughed. "Free from what?"

He looked out to sea. "Well, how about from your parents? Parents that bounce you off to some mental hospital every time you get a slightly unusual notion in your head."

Lydia made a face. "That damn June. She has to tell everybody everything about me."

He was serious. "Look. I'm somebody who knows what it's like to be a wild child in a dead garden."

She just stared. "Nice turn of the phrase."

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm a wild boy in my hometown. The only difference is, I happen to *run* a lot of it."

Lowe Acree went to the wheel. Lydia had stopped piloting her little boat, and Lowe took charge. He guided the vessel safely homeward. While he did, he spoke very softly to her. "I'd like to have a little talk with your parents. I'd like to ask them for your hand."

She didn't bother looking at him. She didn't know what to say. "They're not really my parents, you know."

He smiled. She didn't see it. He spoke even softer. "I know."

"I'm adopted." She was watching the sun set out over the water.

The boat knocked the side of the dock; Lowe secured it. "Feel like scallops? They got a great coquilles Saint Jacques over at The Hut."

"I know."

He smiled. "I guess if you told anybody about this . . . I mean, imagine how insane all this would sound. You meet a guy one day and he spends a few hours with you and he knows for good and all that he wants to marry you. I mean it—I imagine how really out-of-touch this must sound."

She was slowly regaining her composure. She had a method. It was simple. Whenever the events of her life threatened to capsize the still, small boat of her mind, she imagined calm waves on the shore of a golden beach and said the word *waves* over and over to herself as she breathed out. Events in life were just waves on the sand. No more. No less. Just waves. No value, no meaning, no import. No other thoughts or images were allowed to permeate this single-mindedness of the image; the repeated word. And in a while, she was calm.

She finally looked at Lowe. "As it happens, imagining how insane all this would sound is one of the few things I'm really good at."

"Plus, knowing where the marlins are."

She actually smiled. "That too."

"So. Scallops?"

She smiled. "What could happen –it's just a few scallops."

Lowe went to the refrigerated hold and checked his fish. "This is going to be some good eating. You can make arrangements to have it cut up and frozen and sent to my home?"

Lydia nodded.

Lowe helped her off the boat, and as they walked toward The Hut, he took her hand. "I'll treat you so well. I'll never do anything you don't want me to do. Everything will be all right. You'll always be the perfect girl for me, and I'll always love you. You'll never want for any-

thing, and as far as this part of the world is concerned, you'll be kind of like royalty, Southern aristocracy. It'll be just like a dream."

And so they were married. There was a big wedding. All of Savannah's aristocracy was there—along with a few guests from Beautiful. Then the blushing bride went, like Ruth, into another land: Tifton. Where her husband went, she would go. His people would be her people. His home would be her home. She became Mrs. Lydia Habersham Acree—and not one of those three names was actually her own. It was, in fact, very much like a dream. But what Lowe Acree had in mind was a different kind of dream altogether.

# 39

## *The Belly of the Beast*

What Lowe Acree had in mind was a nightmare. Lowe had forgotten to mention that he had a temper, and that this temper was often enhanced by the use of a drug he concocted by means of his connection with a very lucrative chemical franchise. It was a combination of heroin, cocaine, and a remedy for seasickness. He injected himself with this drug, and his talent for prodigious violence became Promethean. On many occasions it occurred to him to give Lydia some of the same drug, but his greed always prevented it. He wanted it all for himself. Besides, she didn't need it. She was so frightened when he was in these moods that she'd do anything he said.

She got lost in a kind of trance after a while. None of it was real to her, the whole marriage idea. It all started seeming . . . well, like a dream. As promised.

"Every time he'd take the drug, he'd get worse. First it was just yelling and hitting. Then it was little games he'd play—stalking and . . . I don't know." She shrugged. "I just came to accept it as a normal part of my life, like any other incident: no value, no import. Just another wave. I didn't have any other way of dealing with it. I couldn't see a way out. Maybe that sounds strange—but you don't know how a thing like that is from the *inside* unless you've been there yourself."

Maytag made as to get up and go to her, but Dally put her hand on his arm. Lydia was deep in some dark place now—you don't wake up a sleepwalker, they say.

"Then there was a moment that Lowe's violence got beyond his ability to control it. It was a dilly. He wanted to meet some men out beyond the legal limit of the country, out on the high seas. These men had a huge supply of heroin and a bigger supply of cocaine, and they were willing to sell it to Lowe for lots of money."

Dally shifted. She knew something rough was coming. I don't know how, but I could tell she was about to get up and go away.

"The day began like any other in the previous weeks. I ended up piloting the boat out to sea and he got wasted, started threatening to toss me overboard. I started yelling back at him, and he whacked me good in the head maybe a couple dozen times. I went down."

All this was with no hint of strangeness or disgust. It was all just a part of the play. She was just an actor, strutting and fretting her hour away.

"I couldn't breathe, I think he might have broken my nose. I must have passed out. Lowe was too far gone to know that I'd lapsed into deep unconsciousness."

She closed her eyes.

Maytag got up. "Stop."

Peachy took him by the arm, nudged him away. Maytag didn't resist. I think he might have been crying.

Lydia just went on. "I think surely Lowe, at the time, must have been farther away from normalcy than he'd ever been. He was in the middle of his deal with these drug men. I'm sure he said it didn't matter about me. He said to just leave me. They'd come back later. They'd revive me. I'm guessing the men gave him a ride back to shore to where he'd stashed the money. They just left the drugs on board with me. Everything would be fine. Why worry? Everything was taken care of. Nothing to worry about."

I had to stop her. She was about to lose it. "Hey, Lydia . . ."

But it only served to prompt her farther into the story. "As they were leaving, I vaguely remember the youngest man, a Cuban boy really . . . he helped me to the cot down in the hold. I was barely breathing."

Dally was up now, wandering a little way off, like it was a botany lecture in which she had little interest, but I could tell she was still listening.

"I have no idea how long I slept. When I woke up, everyone was gone. I roused myself, not really sure of anything that had gone on."

I suddenly remembered something. "Hey. On your boat. There's a copy of Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare. That yours?"

She smiled and nodded, a little released from the awful spell of the memory of that day. "You remember that book?"

I smiled back. "Sorta." I looked over at Dally. "Charles and Mary Lamb, they tell the stories from Shakespeare's plays to little kids—like me and Lydia, at the time."

Dally was anxious to get the story over with. "The point is?"

I shrugged. "It was something of a clue. Probably one of the things that made Sylvia/Lydia show up in my dream deal."

Dally was still too impatient. She looked at Lydia. "So, you stayed out at sea?"

She nodded. "Found the drugs on my boat and tossed them over the side. Cleaned up the boat. Threw all my clothes away—just like Flap's grandma. I moved the boat around in the sea, over by some of the smaller islands, where they wouldn't find me. Swam for hours every day in the salty water, washing it all away. Over and over I just kept saying waves. The sky was blue, the sea was calm, the days were numberless. The mind was clearing. Got back in the boat. Headed home."

Dally was confused. "You had no clothes?"

"Nothing I'd ever worn in my relationship with Lowe—I made sure of that. I found one of my old swimming suits in a cedar chest under the guest bed."

"How long did it take you to get back?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But there was a big fuss when I got there. They said I'd been gone nearly three weeks."

I nodded. "Yeah. I saw the newspaper article at June's."

"Lowe was waiting for me at home—I mean my parent's home. They'd all agreed that the situation—my being gone so long—was too strange to let me wander around unsecured from then on. The parents didn't even want to listen to my version of the story. I could go back to the mental hospital, or I could stay married. That was that." She looked at one of the grave markers. "I still thought—even after all that—it wasn't a bad way to get out from under the folks at home. I couldn't bear to be with them. I think they call it being between the devil and the deep blue sea."

Maytag and Peachy were milling around a little ways off. They didn't care to hear any more. Dally had nodded her head through most of the tale, her eyes nearly closed. I was feeling a little like I had the flu, my own self.

Lydia was droning on. "I have absolutely no idea why Lowe thought he'd want to marry me. Whacking me for no reason, yelling at me in church. We went to church, can you believe it? When his boss, the president of the bank, got married to some secretary half his age? I made the mistake of crying at the wedding. It just made me so sad to see that girl marrying a man old enough to be her father just so she could have money. Lowe beat me up right there in the church. Most of the people just pretended not to see it, can you imagine? That was just before Lowe died." She fixed a gaze on me. "Why do people want money so much, Flap?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you?"

"Nope. I'm motivated by other things."

"Like . . . what?"

"Well, right at the moment I wouldn't mind finding Lowe Acree alive and killing him all over again. Thinking I'd bury him up to his neck in calamari, and use his melon for batting practice."

"Nice image."

"Thanks. And these things I would do for the love of it. Money would not be my object."

"So you can't tell me why people are like Lowe."

"Nope. I can't tell you because I just don't know."

"Well, then."

I wanted to let her off the hook, get some rest, but I still needed some other information.

"Sugar? Where . . . where do you reckon you've been all this time? I mean, while the cops and the Turner twins and June and half the police force of Savannah—not to mention yours very truly—have been searching everywhere for you?"

"I've been with a kid named Ronnie Tibadeau."

Just shove a lightning bolt up the back of my neck, why don't you.

"Ronnie Tibadeau?"

"Yeah, he's a grungy little runner for Lowe and Tommy. I'm pretty sure he ran up to Atlanta now and again with supplies for the drug dealers there. Anyway, he and Tommy Acree found me at the house out on the island. . . ."

"Okay, I'll bite. Which island?"

"Cumberland?"

"Pretty, post–Frank Lloyd Wright job with an upstairs?"

"Yes. How do you—?"

"—I've been there."

Nothing surprised her that night. "Okay. Anyway, they found me there. Wasn't that hard, really. It's where I *always* go to get away from trouble in these parts."

They must have collected her just before the Turner boys got there. Timing's everything, even in weirdness. "So where did they take you?"

"I don't know. Someplace around here."

"When?"

"Flap, honest, I don't know. Time is a little . . . skewed just now."

"So how'd you get here tonight?"

"Tommy came by and let me go. Then he and Ronnie had a fight." She closed her eyes. "Or maybe they had a fight and let me go—maybe that was it."

I wasn't going to let her go over the edge just now. I had to keep her on the beam. "Just how much of this do you think Tommy Acree is into?"

"He's a policeman. He's Lowe's cousin."

"Yeah, him."

"Gee, I don't know. He knew a lot about it. He and Lowe were going into business together. They wanted to buy the Turner land and set up a manufacturing plant for Lowe's drug."

"Yeah—they call it Homicide."

"What?"

"That's what they call it, the drug you say he was taking."

"Whatever. He was going to use that land as a place to make it. It's really private. Tommy knew about all that. They were going to make a fortune."

I wanted to be sure. "Tommy knew."

"Tommy *invested*."

I nodded. "How come the boys wouldn't sell the land?"

"They thought Lowe was going to use it for a chemical dump. That's what he told everybody."

Maytag's voice came out of the darkness behind me. "Maybe this is important, maybe it ain't. But it just come to me *one* reason why Lowe could have been so interested in Lydia. See, me an' Peach? We arranged, a good while back, with our family lawyer, that if anything ever happened to us, that particular land would go over to Lydia."

The silence was only a backdrop for crickets and tree frogs.

Lydia and Dally and I were giving them one very strenuous look.

Dally said it before anyone else did. "Yeah, that might explain why Lowe was sweet on you, honey. He always figured he could get the boys

declared incompetent—or maybe he even had the idea that they'd get dead somehow—and then the land would be yours. And since you're nutty in the fruit basket . . . no offense . . ."

She smiled. ". . . none taken . . ."

Dally finished. ". . . and he was your husband, the land would be his."

I popped another look at the boys. "Now, why would you give the land over to Lydia?"

They looked at me like I couldn't even speak English.

Maytag shook his head. "We don't have that much money to speak of, but we do have land. It's all we got, to give to our family."

Peachy agreed. "We love her, Flap. She's family."

I was about to launch into a very long tirade about the nature of family, when there was another voice in the darkness—and right on cue, if you ask me.

# 40

## *Summer Freeze*

"Everybody just stand real still." Tommy Acree stepped into the dim light that bounced off the gravestones from the streetlamps not so far away. His gun was poised and his hand was steady. "Boy"—he actually laughed out loud—"you are all so *very* under arrest." You could tell he wanted to shoot *something* real bad.

Maytag spoke like a little kid. "Hey, Tommy." Remember how the little girl says "Hey, Boo" to Robert Duvall in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? That voice.

Tommy's eyes were dancing. "Lord, I done hit the jackpot." He was looking at the five of us like we were buried treasure. "Now I wished I hadn't sent Taylor and everybody else on home. I just had a hunch"—more laughing—"but I didn't expect this. I surely would have brought my fellow officers of the law along with me."

I kept my hands very calm, and right where he could see them. "Okay, *Tom,* here's the deal: Put the gun down and get away from me."

He wasn't even the least bit irritated. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Because if you don't, all kinds of hell is going to befall all over you."

"Sorry?"

I took a little step toward him. "First, I know about the drugs. I know Lowe was a bad man—maybe you are too. Second, I know why you wanted the Turner land. And third, I believe I know how Lowe died. It has almost *nothing* to do with anybody you're looking at. Not to mention that between me and Maytag and Peachy, you're going down like a broken elevator."

He wasn't moved. "I don't care what you know. I got you good. There's a big old dead body over there under your car, bud. I conked him on the head, wired your car, ran over him, and then handcuffed the body to the chassis. You're in absolutely the most trouble you've ever been in. Maybe I'll just shoot you now for resisting arrest and have done with it."

I sucked in a breath. I couldn't deal with Ronnie Tibadeau just then. I had to let Tommy know who was boss. "I already told you: I don't care about that. And I'm standing pretty close. I doubt you'd kill me before I got a hold of you. Then you'd be in all kinds of hurt."

Peachy strolled up to me calmly. "He ain't gonna shoot you, Mr. Tucker."

Maytag agreed. "He's comprised of nearly one hundred percent chicken manure. He don't got the guts to clean fish."

Peachy explained it to me. "Him and Lowe? They used to beat up on people all the time in high school."

Maytag agreed. "They were what you'd call delinquent."

I remembered. "The Peaker Brother-morticians had a few things to say along those lines."

Peachy wasn't finished. "But they'd never do it unless there was only one to beat up on—and *both* of them Acrees."

Maytag looked at Tommy. "There's only one of you now, bud—and a whole mess-buncha *us*."

Tommy waved the gun a little wildly. "You're forgetting about this."

Peachy laughed. "What? That little old thing? I hurt myself worse shavin' than you could wi' that." And he launched himself toward the policeman.

Tommy panicked. You could see it in his eyes. I don't think he even meant to, but he started spraying bullets. Peachy was hit right away—leg, I think. I caught something a second later, just where I part my hair. But we got him. In less than ten seconds Tommy Acree was flat on the ground with five hundred pounds of mad redneck all over him, and me looking down at the mess. Peachy was dabbing at his leg, but it didn't seem to bother him much.

I had the gun in my hand. Then I started feeling my head. "Damn. I think you shot me. Tommy, can you see this? Am I shot here?"

But he was in no condition to answer. Dally was right there; got a good peep at my noggin; pronounced me alive. All through the ruckus Lydia just stood there smiling, like it was all a dream.

Peachy looked up at Dally. "What're we gonna do with 'im?"

She sighed. "Let's take him back to the nightclub. Maybe he'll cool off and we can get somethin' settled, here, about all this brouhaha." She eyeballed me. "Including your mechanic friend, Ronnie."

The boys had to bop Tommy a couple before he'd calm down, but they got him to his feet, and we were off.

Once again, what a sight we must have been: Dally in the lead; Tommy in between the football stars; me and Lydia, arm in arm, bringing up the tail of the grand parade.

Peachy called out in a stage whisper. "Hey, Ms. Oglethorpe. What'd you say you was callin' your new nightclub place?"

"Too Easy."

"Oh. Good name."

Without turning, she aimed her voice at me. I could well imagine the look on her face. "It's not a name, it's a way of life."

I wasn't absolutely sure, but I thought just maybe, in that moment the sun might be coming up over the old churchyard. The long night was nearly over.

# 41

## *The Big Dream*

We settled into the backroom of Dally's new club. We didn't know what else to do, so we tied Tommy up to a chair like you see in the movies. Now, ordinarily a guy like me will avoid tying up an officer of the law like it was the swine flu. But under the circumstances—we had in fact resisted arrest, roughed the guy up, *and* accused him of all manner of heinous crimes and whatnot—a little chair-tying seemed the next logical step.

There in the first light of day I was the last one standing at the future Too Easy. Lydia was lying down on a drop cloth, trying to sleep. The boys were making coffee and making a lot of noise horsing around with something in the other room. Dally was in what was left of an armchair. It was pretty beat-up. I guess it must have been left by the previous managers of the establishment.

I tried to speak to Detective Acree with as much deference as I could muster. "Now, Tommy, if you'll let me, I think I can tell you how your cousin Lowe died."

He spit. "I know how he died. Those retards in the other room—who, incidentally, don't seem to be able to figure out the coffeemaker, let alone any kind of alibi—beat my cousin's head into his own desk."

"Not quite. They choked him, but they didn't kill him."

"What?"

"They got him in a choke hold so he'd quit whacking his wife."

He squinted. I think he might have even twitched. "She wasn't even there."

Sleepily, from the drop cloth: "Yes, I was. I was hiding in the bathroom."

I continued. "Apparently Lowe had a private bath in his office."

Tommy was not amused. "I know what he had in his office."

"I don't think you do." I raised my voice. "Maytag, you boys about finished in there?"

Peachy's head popped around the corner, grinning. "They got a hula hoop in here."

"Cool, but could you all come on in?"

From the other room I could hear Maytag: "Awww."

But they came. Lydia sat up. Dally had a look of mirth I hadn't seen in a while from her. Used to be a regular look. I was happy to see it back.

As the boys were filing in, I had to ask her about it. "What's so funny?"

She shook her head. "Just good to see you in your element."

I looked around. "Naw. This place hasn't been my element for quite a while."

"Not what I meant."

I had to smile back then. "I know. And by the way? I was just thinking the same kind of thing about you."

She actually blushed. I have no idea why.

But we didn't pursue it. The stage was set. I guess I *was* in my element, at that. It was the time of the day to let all shadows brush away. I was on.

"Stop me when I go wrong, anybody. But, Lydia? The day Lowe died, he called you up on the phone and told you to come over to the bank."

Tommy was impatient with me. "How in this world would you know a thing like that?"

Lydia yawned. "He's right."

I gave Tommy the eye. "Given the tenor of their relationship as I now understand it, I can't really see her going over to his workplace of her own volition." I went on to Lydia. "He called you to bring him a shot, I'm guessing. He said something like he had a meeting with the Turner twins and he wanted to be *prepared* for it, so you were to bring him one of his syringes."

She was a little more alert, riveted, no doubt, by my acute awareness of the events of her life.

"Right. How would you know that?"

I blinked. "I'm good at guessing. You gave him the fatal shot. Why else would you think you'd killed the guy? Unless you really *did* whisper a magic word in his ear that made his brain explode. I'm not entirely ruling that out as a possibility, knowing you as I do."

She just nodded, thinking.

"So—when you got there, you tried to talk him out of it."

She couldn't take it anymore. "This is amazing. It's like you were there."

Dally answered. "He's got a trick."

I finished. "Plus, it's the only thing that makes any sense out of the events."

Tommy was unconvinced. He spat out a German-sounding word that has something to do with carnal knowledge in the English penal system.

I was undaunted. "Be that as it may, Tom, Lydia was only trying to save your cousin from himself. Plus, as we've discussed among ourselves, Lowe would apparently get even meaner than he normally was after he'd taken that shot—so she was trying to do herself a favor too."

Lydia nodded silently.

I went on. "But Lowe wouldn't hear of it. He insisted on his shot. Lydia gave it to him. And he was *already* mad because he'd had to argue with Lydia to get it. I'm saying he was *plenty* steamed when the boys showed up, a little early." I looked at Lydia. "How'm I doing? Still on the beam?"

Lydia confirmed.

"He told you to hide . . . like, in the bathroom so he could dispatch the twins, get their land, make the deal. Whatever. You hid. Lowe yelled. The boys resisted. You popped out from the bathroom, trying to leave—or maybe trying to help the boys. Lowe wouldn't let you. The boys took exception. They got Lowe into a choke hold. He started to pass out."

She was sitting up now, completely awake.

I nodded at her; she nodded back. I looked back at Tommy. "She could see there was something wrong with him. His face bugged out or something. My guess at this point is that he'd made the dose too strong. All the activity with the boys sped everything up and he went into shock. Maybe it was in combination with the exertion or the lack

of breath, whatever. The drug zapped him in his brain pan and fell down on his whatchamacallit and he was dead."

Lydia couldn't seem to quit nodding.

Tommy's eyes were on her now, like a searchlight, like a lighthouse beacon. She seemed about to tumble over the edge again.

She started to get to her feet, but she couldn't. "That's right. I gave him his shot. He said that's what he wanted. He was asking for it. So I gave it to him. I killed my husband. That's what this story means: I killed him."

Maytag shook his head. "Nuh-uh, darlin'. It was me that was chokin' him to death."

Peachy wouldn't hear of it. "In point of fact it was me that let him slip down in his seat so he banged his head. That's what did it. Absolutely my fault." He looked at Tommy. "I apologize." Like he'd spilled Lowe's coffee on his desk.

She was still nodding, like one of those dumb dogs some people have in the back window of their cars. "I gave him the shot. I killed him."

Tommy was still glued to Lydia, and his face was different than I'd yet seen it: contorted, strange, devoid of all the self-assurance and bravado I'd noted there in our earlier encounter. His voice was very soft, and kinder than I would have imagined it could be. "Lydia? Honey? It's not your fault. It's not you at all."

"I gave him the shot. I did. I'm the one."

"Maybe you did, but he was asking for it."

She was right on the brink. "Doesn't matter. I killed a man."

"No, you didn't."

She closed her eyes. "I gave him the shot that killed him."

I thought Tommy was going to cry or explode or roll on the floor like at a church meeting. "But you're not the one that . . . you didn't make up the . . . you didn't make it to where it was too strong to take . . ." But he couldn't finish his thought. He let go his gaze. He was trying hard to see something in one of the cracks in the floor. He wanted to die. It might as well have been written on a sign around his neck.

I think I got it before anybody else. Maybe it was something somebody at the family reunion at the Kingdom Baptist had mentioned before about their suspicions about Tommy Acree. Maybe it was something in his eyes when he looked at Lydia. "That's right, Lydia. You didn't make up the shot and put too much juice in it." I eyed Lowe's cousin for all he was worth. "Tommy did that. Didn't you, Tommy?"

He was still staring at the floor. His voice was like an electric shaving razor, tinny and growling: "I don't know whether I thought it would kill him . . . or not. I just don't know." He looked at me. Maybe he was asking my opinion. "What could I do? He was killing her. Everybody could see that. He beat her in front of everybody in church one day. Can you imagine that? In *church*. He was using her like she was a rag doll, like she was a . . . something not real. He didn't love her." Suddenly he really wanted to know my answer. "How could he do it? How could he do those awful things?"

I helped. "To the woman *you* loved."

No thunder, no lightning, no special effects at all. He just nodded, looking down at the floor again.

Lydia blinked hard; talked slow. "What?"

Maytag looked at him, no disgust, no sympathy, just fact: "Well, Mr. Acree . . . if *that's* true, you seem to be more messed up of a person than just about anybody around, in my opinion."

Peachy thought so too. "Now that Lowe's dead."

Dally seemed to find it all strangely amusing in the grand scheme of things. She let a moment of silence pass before she had her say. "So now *everybody* wants to take credit for killing Lowe Acree."

Tommy looked at her. "I got into his house . . . just that morning. That very morning. It was after he left for work and when Lydia went to the store. I saw her go. I knew he would want a taste when he dealt with the twins. He always said it gave him the killer instinct in the business deals." He looked at Peachy. "Not that he'd need it with those two. Still, I knew he'd take him some." He looked to me for support, it seemed. "See, I thought he'd come home for it. I didn't have any idea he'd be crazy enough to do it at work. I just didn't figure on anybody else getting involved. He'd just shoot up, conk out, that'd be it. Junkie overdose. If he was just really sick or knocked out, I'd find him, take him to the hospital, he'd be exposed—maybe even get help. I'd like to believe I had that in my head. But if he died, I'd be stunned. The town'd gossip about it for months. But by and by something else would happen that would take their minds off it and they'd be on to something else. That'd be that. I'd console the widow—respectfully. I'd wait six months more. We'd date. Everything would be fine—eventually." He twisted around so he could face Lydia full on. "I'd have treated you so good. You just don't know. You would have been like a queen."

She smiled. "That's what Lowe said." But there was no meanness in her voice.

I was more on the mean side. "That's why you didn't allow an autopsy?"

He was back to me. "I just couldn't be sure. With him dead it was just as well if nothing else came up. I mean . . . I was connected to it too. But it was perfect the way it was, see. I could blame the twins for the murder, get their land anyway, be a hero for finding my cousin's killers—same ending as before: happily ever after. I just never figured on . . . I never thought she'd be there." He looked at her like he was on his deathbed looking at the angels. "If I'd known you were there . . ."

Dally sat back. "The girl of your dreams."

He shot a glance back to Lydia. "Look at her. She's the girl of everybody's dreams."

Well, she'd certainly been such stuff as dreams were made on. You had to give her that. Still, I was a little skeptical. "So, Tommy? Why this sudden confession? I mean, why all this talk now? Why tell us everything?"

"She's been through enough. I never figured on your finding her. I never figured on your being capable of that. You don't seem like you could find your way to your own shoes, to me, you don't have the gumption—but I guess you've got your ways." Back to the floor again, like the magic words were written there, the ones that could make Lydia well. "I didn't think it all through, I guess." Once again, to yours truly. "I didn't plan on your being even remotely motivated enough to pursue all this. You seem on the lazy side."

I wasn't offended. "Yeah, but I'm lucky."

Dally wouldn't hear of it, though. She's really a swell friend to have, after everything's said and done. "Luck's got nothin' to do with it. He's got a trick." She popped me a look that could light up a city block. "His cosmology is the entire human spirit."

I smiled big. "Boy, you got a memory on you could choke a horse."

She shook her head. "I remember what I want to."

The boys didn't understand, but they nodded like they did.

Dally nudged the moment toward a more immediate concern. "Say, Tom—by the way? What do you think Ronnie's doing out there under Flap's car?"

He wouldn't look us in the eye now. That spot on the floor must have been absolutely fascinating. "Ronnie did us favors."

I wanted him to tell the story, even though I felt I now knew how

it went, so I chimed in. "So I'm told. Did they include drug-running to Atlanta? I've got a friend in the business is why I'm asking."

"Sometimes."

I nodded. "Go on."

"So I got him to bug your car. Then I got him to come along with me to help clean up this mess down here, and I needed somebody to watch Lydia while I took care of the boys; you—whatever else came up." Softer. "I just wanted to make sure she was all right."

Dally wouldn't let up. "So?"

"So . . . I was pretty sure she'd be out at that house on Cumberland. It's where she usually went when she ran away from Lowe, or when she was confused. She was there, just sitting on the porch. When I told her Lowe was dead, she just shrugged."

I was impatient. "Skip on down."

He shifted; looked at me. "Ronnie was a boy, a little boy. He wasn't bad, but he had a troubled personality. He was really little more than a stupid petty criminal. I should never have left him with Lydia."

Lydia spoke up. "It was nothing."

He was suddenly very hot. "The *hell* it was."

Dally intruded once more. "Get on with the story."

He stabbed a look her way, but went on then. "He was touching her when I came back from finding Mr. Tucker at the same house on Cumberland. He was touching her hair."

Lydia started to stand. "It was nothing, Tommy. He was just petting my head." She looked at me. "We were at a little bed-and-breakfast just around the corner from the graveyard."

I had to ask. "So, Tom—why didn't you just take her over to her parents' house?"

He shook his head violently. "Those drunks. They wouldn't know how to handle sitting *down*, not even with a set of instructions and a diagram. She didn't need zookeepers." He tried to look at her, but he couldn't—like she was too bright, like he was looking into the sun. "She needed me."

I nodded. "And when you got there, to the bed-and-breakfast, Ronnie was messing with her."

"I whipped his ass around so fast his brains nearly came out. I shook him like a big old empty gunnysack, but I could see it was upsetting Lydia, so I took him into the bathroom."

Lydia was almost to her feet then. "I could hear them arguing."

He looked at me, not at her. "I popped him a good one on the jaw.

He fell back into the sink. Didn't kill him, but it didn't do him any good. He was out."

I knew what was what. "That's when you got the idea: let Lydia go, let her go where she might lead you to the boys."

He didn't even ask how I guessed that. He just nodded. "I came back in, told her she could go."

Lydia was up now, staring at him. "I'd already told Ronnie I wanted to go back to the sea. I told him my work was done here. He said he couldn't let me go. But he was sorry. That's why he was petting my head, because he was sorry."

Tommy was more frazzled. "I didn't know what I was doing. I told her to leave; got Ronnie up; called some of my seedier associates here in Savannah; shoved him into my car. I don't think she had any idea I was right behind her all the way when she was walking over here. I saw her go into the graveyard. I have no idea how long she wandered around in there looking at tombstones while I was taking care of Ronnie."

She was moving to him. "I was going back to the sea—I was trying to say good-bye to the angel but I heard voices so I stayed in the shadows."

He looked at me, almost ignoring her, like he was explaining. "I should never have let her out of my sight but for a minute. I mean, that's how she was talking: that angel crap."

She was very close now. "I just wanted to say good-bye." She cocked her head. "Hey—I left my parasol there."

I nodded. "Yeah, I saw it over there. What were you doing with an umbrella anyway?"

She shook her head. "Parasol. I always have it, to keep out the sun. Last thing I need is to sunburn this lily skin—and I like the little shadow. I'm not sure I want to see everything I see—not that clearly. See what I'm saying?"

Tommy looked like he was trying to move away from her then, trying to ignore her severe strangeness—maybe because it's one of the things he found so attractive about her. But what do I know?

He looked at me instead. "I couldn't believe it when I saw your car out there. Jesus. I nearly had a wreck stopping." He was shaking his head pretty good now. "I really don't know what I was thinking at that point. I was pretty full up." Full up with what, he did not report. "I unloaded Ronnie. It was nothing. I hot-wired your car like it was meant to start that way. I laid Ronnie in the road, and ran your heap over him good, three, four times. He was pretty dead after that. Then I

called my guys to come and get you. They were right around the corner. I should have known better than to call a set of junkie brothers."

I smiled. "Only one's a junkie. The other's a storyteller."

Tommy Acree started to ask me all sorts of questions, then stopped in what seemed like mid thought and looked at me like a kid. "What was the matter with me? What was I doing? How'd I let it get to this?"

Lydia was beside him now, like a column of fire, burning that side of his face. She reached out and touched him very softly, it seemed to me. He flinched like it singed him.

She whispered. "It's all a dream, Tommy. And it's not even your dream. Isn't that funny? Don't worry. There's nothing to worry about. It'll all be just fine."

Big silence.

# 42

## *The Deal*

Peachy wanted to move on. "What now?"

I started. "Well, now . . ." But I had nowhere to go. "I don't know."

And who would have figured, but it was Lydia came up with the first plan. She got to her feet and announced it like she was giving a speech at the Optimist Club.

"Now we go home. The story's over. We have Tommy arrested by the Savannah police—five witnesses to his confession. Maybe we'll call that nice boy that plays the viola. He loves me—talked to me all the time at June's. Then we exhume Lowe's body for proof. Then we destroy all the drugs he's got, and that's that. Then we go back to our families—I maybe go live with the Turners on their farm if it turns out that I'm not entirely a creature from the sea, which it seems possible to me at this point that I might not be, and . . . then . . ." But she was running out of steam then too.

It had been a long dark night for her. It had taken a lot out of her to set up the whole vision of grand retribution. She'd seen the whole wheel of the cosmos in motion. It's a rare vision. I've had it once or twice myself. It's absolutely exhausting. But she was in a better frame of mind than she had been for a while, anybody could see that.

I had to be the one to bust her bubble. "Not quite, sugar. See, no matter what, in that scenario you're the one who actually wielded the

murder device. So there'd be a little problem with it: You could still go to jail, or worse."

She understood immediately. "Especially considering I'm loonier than a peanut farm."

"There *is* that."

"So what?"

The room fell silent. Most seemed to be waiting for me to make with the wise pronouncements. I took a shot.

"Tommy? Lowe was your cousin, and I'm sure you have some good memories of him."

He shook his head. He didn't want to play.

I wanted him to. "Come on. One good memory. It'll make you feel better about all this, I guarantee."

He was willing to reminisce if it was like a part of the confession. "We used to go bass fishing when we were kids."

It wasn't enough for me. "And?"

And then he actually smiled. "It was so much fun. He'd cut up in the boat so big that we fell in the lake half the time; didn't care a bit. Part of the fun. Didn't hardly ever catch a thing; didn't care about that either."

"Okay, but he turned out to be a very bad man, wouldn't you agree?"

Tommy took his time, but he nodded after a while. "He got that way."

"So let's put Lowe to rest once and for all. What if our plan goes this way: New evidence—that *you* uncover—indicates that Lowe was—oh, my God—some kind of drug fiend. Maybe you find the drugs in his house or something in his papers or whatever. You request an autopsy. That'll prove he died of a drug overdose, confirming your worst fears. Then with big ballyhoo you let the boys off the hook. They happily relax into home life again; you're a big hero for not allowing a travesty of justice. We don't even need to mention Lydia was ever there, ever involved in any way. And we also don't bring up your tampering with Lowe's stash. Everybody's off the hook. All bets are off. And Lowe Acree gets to rest in peace—at whatever godforsaken level of hell he lives at now."

He thought.

But I wouldn't let him think for long. "In exchange for our silence about everything, you get to stay out of jail. But you allow the Turner boys to take Lydia home with them and you promise never, *ever* to mess with her, apart from the occasional Christmas card, ever again in your life."

Maytag popped in. "What about Ronnie?"

I looked at Tommy again. "Yeah. What about Ronnie Tibadeau? I mean, I know he was a petty criminal, but . . ."

Tommy was recovering a little of his mean-cop persona. "I could always say I killed *him* in the line of duty."

Dally had to question that. "By running over him with a car and then handcuffing the body to the chassis? It's a stretch."

Tommy made no eye contact.

Lydia had an idea. "You give a large sum of money to his relatives out of the drug money you and Lowe made. They make a donation to the technical school in Tifton in the name of Ronnie Tibadeau, to establish scholarships—"

I had to break in. "—for auto mechanics."

She nodded. "Right."

Tommy sighed a sigh like the last breath of a dying man.

Dally filled him in. "Otherwise you die in jail."

I checked around the room with everybody. "Okay?"

Lydia was philosophical. "I just wish it could all go back to the way it was when I was little, and all this didn't really matter."

Dally smiled so sweet, you could have had it for dessert. "Flap's good, sugar, but he's already explained to me that the one thing he can't do"—she shot me a look with the eyebrow lift—"is recall a lost hour. So is this deal good enough?"

Lydia smiled. That smile was the lock on my proposition. Tommy saw it, and nodded his head. We had a deal.

# 43

## *Namesakes*

As far as deals go, it worked pretty well. We pulled what was left of poor Ronnie Tibadeau out from under my car. Maytag got the handcuff key from Tommy and unlocked the body. The boys wanted to dispose of him themselves, out of respect for their boyhood acquaintance. They found, appropriately enough, an empty grave in the yard where Ida had lost her voice. They covered him up with a little dirt.

We had a short ceremony where everybody mentioned something good about the boy. I talked about my carburetor. It was very much the product of everybody's being too tired and too strange and stretched for too many hours. Lydia had a tear or two, and I have to admit to feeling pretty crummy about the kid. After all was said and done, he hadn't been a bad sort.

Then we all went back to Tifton. The Peaker Brothers handled the exhuming of Lowe's body. He was in pretty good shape, really, except for the fact that he had no pants on and was wearing boxer shorts with red hearts and Dalmatians. I got a pretty good laugh out of it, and I thought the Peakers might bust a gut slapping their thighs and whacking each other on the arm. Tommy was pretty quiet, but maybe he was remembering going fishing with Lowe as a boy.

Anyway, Lowe was found to have massive amounts of cocaine and heroin in his system. Enough to kill ten guys, they said. The report also

mentioned that he'd probably been boating in the last hours before his death because of the presence in his blood of a common remedy for seasickness.

Lydia Sylvia Habersham Acree—that's the name on her police report—was the dumbfounded inheritor of what was to me a relatively mind-numbing sum of money. It was a sum so staggering to me that I figured grown men would pass out at the mention of it. So remarkable was this sum of money that the guy who was handling the transaction didn't care to even say it out loud. Seems Lowe Acree was fabulously well-to-do, as they say, and had no last will and testament when he died. So it all went to his grieving widow. She didn't seem to care much at all one way or the other. She just looked at the sum of money and smiled. Didn't seem that grandiose to her, I guess. What do I know? I get excited about a fifty-dollar bill.

Lydia paid off Dally's new club on River Street without asking, without even blinking an eye. She wanted to buy me a new car, but I told her the one I had ran just fine. She acquired Lowe's home of course. She had it demolished. There was some talk among us of salting the earth, too, but it never panned out. Lydia built a garden park on the land instead, much to the chagrin of the ritzy neighbors. Planted a lot of impatiens.

Lydia herself moved in with the Turner family. She had her own little room, and she loved to cook with Ida. And every chance she got she'd head east, to the ocean.

Except for a card every December the twenty-fifth, she was never to hear from Tommy Acree again.

And by fall quarter there was a new perpetual scholarship fund at the technical school in Tifton.

For the Turner boys nothing much changed. They were very happy to have Lydia with them whenever she could be there, and the house was filled with laughter nearly all the time. They invited me to their Thanksgiving dinner, but I couldn't make it. Maybe next time.

I did eventually get a bottle or two of Rusty's Barbecue. And despite my unshakable opinion that the word *wine* only applies if it's red and comes from France, Rusty's makes an okay after-dinner drink—like a port, only completely unsophisticated.

When I went down to pick up a case and tie up the last loose ends in Tifton that January, I happened to run into good old Pevus Arnold.

"Hey! Mr. Tucker! Hey!" He was glad to see me.

"Pevus."

"Look." He pushed a cute young girl my way. "It's my wife. You done saved her life. We went up to that Dr. Thompson like you said."

She was reverent. "He's a saint."

Pevus shrugged it off. "She likes him. Anyway, guess what? You'll never guess."

"Okay, so tell me."

"We didn't never know it, but she'd got twins."

She nodded, very proud. "We had twins."

I didn't know what to say. "Wow."

He was earnest. "Uh-huh, and if we hadn't found it out when we did, things might just of gone real bad for 'er. That's what they said at the doctor's. But thanks to you, we all gonna be just fine."

She was impatient. "Tell him."

"Oh. Okay. Well, seein' as how you got us to the doctor—and also because you saved Peachy and Maytag, which I did tell you they were my buds and it makes you a kinda local hero down here or whatnot—we think the world and all of you. So, if you don't mind—"

She couldn't wait. "We named the babies after you and Ms. Oglethorpe."

Without the least self-consciousness he added the kicker. "You a old dude, an' prob'ly ain't never gonna have none of your own, so we thought it was kind of an honor or what have you."

So, okay, then I *really* didn't know what to say. "You actually want to name your children Flap and Dalliance?"

She spoke like she was in church. "Oh, yes."

He explained it to me. "One's a boy and one's a girl, see?"

She thought about it. "They don't look much alike, for twins."

Pevus poked his wife. "I'm just thankful the girl looks like you an' not me."

She giggled. She was very content. He squeezed her. He was very happy. What could I say?

"Well . . . thanks, kids. I am honored. Dally will be too."

Pevus nodded. His work was done. They headed off around the side of the shed where Rusty kept his stuff. It was one of the images out of my little vision thing from months before.

I called out after them. "By the way? I kind of wish I'd gotten a chance to thank Ronnie for fixing my car. Runs great now. I don't ever have to stop on the side of the road anymore."

He turned and smiled softly at me. "That's good. I miss Ronnie. You know him. He's prob'ly off on some bad deed or other wherever he is. I'm happy the car still works good, though. Never can tell what

kinda people might happen by when you're stranded on the side of the road."

I guess when it's all said and done, it's important to remember your family, no matter how loony they are. That's the thing about the family folklore. No matter how odd it seems, it's got to be passed down, from one person in the family to another, through time and through space. It has a reality to it that nothing else has—something you've actually touched with your own hands, or spoken with your own voice. Why do you have to do it? Because it's essential when you're trying to figure out something about yourself. And take it from me, the unexamined life is not even worth sleeping through.

But there are two kinds of families, see. One of them you're born with. It's a biological event and there's no squawking about that, you've just got to take it. But the other kind is your spiritual family, if you don't mind my putting it that way. Those are the people you find—or the people who find you— the ones you're *supposed* to be around. Those are the people you have dinner with, the people you count on, the people you listen to when they tell their stories. In short, those are the people that something tells you to love. What else can you do?

*(Continued from front flap)*

twins, Maytag and Peachy, have gone missing, as has Lydia Habersham, a free spirit more at home in the sea than with her aristocratic, wealthy family. Lydia's banker husband, Lowe Acree, cousin of the county sheriff who once coveted Lydia, lies dead. From the desolate lowlands to the timeless coastal islands, Flap searches for the answers others will kill to keep buried. Along the way, he must look inward to confront his own forgotten past and a longing for family he has tried to deny.

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*Phillip De Poy* made his debut as a novelist with ***Easy***. He has previously published short fiction, poetry and criticism in *Story*, the *Southern Poetry Review, Xanadu, Yankee* and elsewhere. A recipient of numerous grants, including the National Endowment for the Arts, Phillip De Poy is currently the creative director of the Maurice Townsend Center for the Performing Arts at West Georgia College.

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN 1-56865-826-5

EAN

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19299